

THE MIDDLETON TIMES

DEC. 2025

ABSOLUTE

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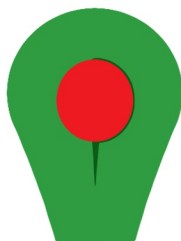
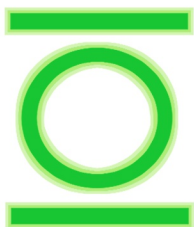
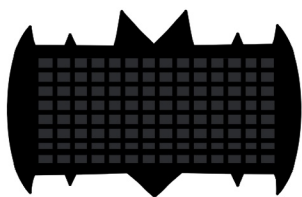


- BAT FACTS
1. BATS ARE NOT ONLY FLY
 2. THEY CAN FLY 100 MILES PER HOUR
 3. THEY EAT INSECTS AND
 4. SOME BATS



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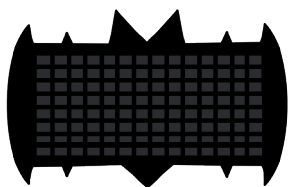
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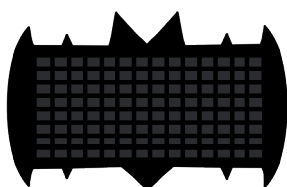
Montserrat by Julieta Ulanovsky

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ABSOLUTE BATMAN







Life of a Cat Burglar

Elusive Thrilling

Stealing Cat Riches

Wind Night Disappeared Free

Mystery Horror Reunion

Broken Love

Fight



Forever

BLESSEDGIRTHMA

I know where you live.

I know where your friends and family live. I know you're a mama's boy with a dead daddy.

I know you lost everything at that zoo. I know you never got over it.

I know you excelled at school both physically and mentally. I know why you chose to be a civil engineer.

I know why you put on that mask every night. I know your friends are broken because of that choice, and I know your mother is worried about you.

I know who you are, Bruce.

Yet, you don't know me.

I'm a... Different kind of foe.

I'm a force of nature, much like you. But unlike you, I don't have any limits.

I can do whatever I want, whenever I want.

I can hurt who I want. I can kill who I want.

I can't be scared. I can't be stopped.

I can't be beaten. I can't be killed.

You can't even call the cops on me.

How can you, when I'm everywhere around you?

I'm the tracker in your car.

I'm the monitoring software on your computer and phone.

I'm every security camera you see on the street.

I'm every drone you see in the sky.

I'm every gun you pull out of the hands of every criminal you beat.

I'm every celebrity you see.

I'm every cop and politician in the city.

I'm the mayor.

I'm the governor.

I'm even the president.

There is not one thing or person on this planet that isn't mine to control. But no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I hurt you and the ones you love, I can't have you.

I know what you are, Bruce.

You are chaos.

You are disorder.

You are insanity.

You can't be controlled.

I can hit you. I can cut you.

I can bleed you. I can shoot you.

I can **KILL YOU.**

But you'll never be mine.

You don't know how much I hate that. The fact that someone like you, an overgrown freak of a man, can manage to slip out of my fingers, no matter how tightly I hold you. It's only now I've begun to realize how... Obsessed, I am.

You are my White Whale.

You are the one goal I'll never be able to conquer, no matter how much money or power I have.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if you're even an obstacle at all to my plans. With what I know about this world, perhaps you are meant to weigh the other side of the scale that will always tilt my way.

I'm meant to hurt you as much as you hurt me.

I'm beginning to believe that one day, one of us will kill the other, and this little thing of ours will be over.

But if the opposite is true and neither of us can finish it, I think we'll be doing this,

Forever.

BATMAN



The Dark Knight

Dusk arrives, after a day at the zoo, a promised joy now shattered
I am alone, their faces obscured by shadow

Most paths severed by my own hand, only one remains for me to walk, illuminated by the moon

They became strangers: the cat long vanished, the reptile trying to get in, the bird sinking deeper, the question lost to obsession and the half-man drifting away

At midnight, a carnival of pleasure floods the streets, a plague of laughter, its ringleader with his face charred and gone. I must stop them all, alone

But one always blocks my way, who knows too much, who I should push away, but I decide on a truce, what could go wrong?

Then the truth is revealed, I need their help and they agree, I should be happy but I can't as my deepest fear begins taking shape

The night wears on, the party is over, the ringleader gone, my friends insist on giving their help

What should stay forgotten in the night is released, a monster made of venom arrives, breaking everything

I am alone again, I should have let them remain strangers, instead the night took them as well

Dawn approaches, I can see the twilight, the cat has come back, but it isn't the same, only a few hours more

All that stands in my way is a man forged of pain, and a man forged of fear, their presence an eclipse

A long night, without an end, I do not know where I will go, but the day must break

Or all of this will have been for nothing

Keeping The Lights On

Cheese

"The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth."

— **African Proverb**



[Firebug Community Center.]

[The Narrows, Gotham City.]

[Years ago.]

[6:22 P.M.]

"Evan, order up! One serving of broccoli cheddar!" Bridgit called out, ringing the bell. Her smile was always the brightest thing in the Firebug Community Center, even in spite of the horrific burn scar along her left eye. No one asks how she got it, because her reputation precedes whatever wound anyone sees. And besides, she's never let it stop her from serving those in need.

The community center's special on Tuesdays was always broccoli cheddar. A personal favorite of Evan Pike's, but his younger sister Bridgit was always more partial to Friday's spicy chicken tortilla flavor. They've bickered about it ever since they came up with the menu.

The soup kitchen of the Firebug Community Center opened only recently, but it's quickly developed into a hotspot for Gotham residents who have nowhere else to go. A warm meal and free clothes are worth their weight in gold to the downtrodden of The Narrows—of which there are many.

The experiment was thought up by Evan Pike, the five-year proprietor of Firebug and local pillar of the community. He

realized he needed to do more than just have a safe space for Gothamites. So, after a few years of success, he got to work renovating one of the old storage rooms into a soup kitchen. Pretty soon, volunteers began rushing in to help, including Bridgit's old engineering partner, Bruce Wayne, all the way from Crime Alley.

"On it, Bridgit!" Evan hollered back, lopping off a head of broccoli and scraping a pile of its chopped florets into a deep, bubbling pot.

Bruce smiled as he kneaded the dough for tonight's batch of dinner rolls. He sprinkled a healthy dusting of flour onto the countertop and got to working the glutenous ball.

"Man, Evan, you're an inspiration, you know that?" he chuckled, adjusting his apron and making sure no flour was on his jet-black shirt. "When me and Bridgit were up all night working on the jetpack prototype for Mr. Lynns' class, you were there making food for us. Hell, look what you're doing right now," Bruce gestured to the walls of the soup kitchen.

Evan waved his hand sheepishly and began shredding a handful of yellow cheddar into the pot. "Don't kid yourself, Wayne. I'm nothing special. The fire's already been lit in The Narrows from the start. I'm—" Evan paused. "We're just fanning the flames."

"Yeah... fanning the flames," Bruce muttered, readying the dough to proof. He began preheating the wood-fired oven, watching the old, rustic, almost archaic mechanism flare to life.

"...But can't we do *more*? Every day, we serve more and more people sent here, ruined by... by addiction, or priced out of their own homes, and I just... I don't know if we're helping this neighborhood as much as we could be. Not if we don't hit the roots."

Bridgit turned back to look at the two, listening intently. No one was in line, so she let herself eavesdrop a bit.

Evan taste-tested the soup, slowly turning the heat up, pondering. He peered into the pot, watching the bubbles explode along the surface. "I suppose so. I bet that could work. But that's not how *I* work."

He turned the heat back down. "Over the years, I've decided that... a wildfire's not gonna warm this city. So I set out to build a hearth," he smiled, gesturing to the kitchen in its entirety.

Bridgit shook her head at the cheesy one-liner.

"Maybe..." Bruce rubbed his chin, shortly before his phone rang.

"—Oh, shoot," Bruce clicked his tongue, unlacing his apron. "Mom's calling. I gotta head out. Sorry, Evan."

"Don't sweat it, man. Hey, I'll save some food for you in the fridge next time," he laughed.

As Bruce exited out the back entrance. Bridgit rolled her shoulders. If there was anyone in her old engineering class that rivaled her ability, it was Bruce Wayne. And whenever they were partnered together, they could turn a pile of scrap into something beautiful. But that was years ago.

Bridgit shrugged, itched at her burn scar, and turned to serve the next in line.

"Hello, welcome to—"

Her eyes widened at the sight of the barrel of a gun pointed towards her and the glint of a GCPD badge.

"Hands behind your head!" the officer cawed, as three more marched into the building, firearms aimed at the volunteers and homeless alike. The scene burned out of control in an instant.

Bridgit complied, eyes locked onto the inky blackness of the man's shades.

"Search the whole building for the drugs! The tip said they were in the kitchen!" he ordered, as the rest of his men flooded the community center, raiding nonexistent stashes and sending bowls of food shattering to the floor.

She squeezed her hands tighter, her nails digging into her palms, spite building up in her lungs. Her eyes were still locked onto the man with a gun. Bridgit could feel her blood come to a boil, ready to explode out of her skin.

A distinct whistle of a pressure-bound kettle began to ring in her ears, listening to the dream that the Pike family worked for years to build, getting ransacked in mere minutes. Without warning, without recompense, without any justification other than some bogus "tip" from some anonymous bastard.

Her mind began to race, pacing about in fluttering, panicked wingbeats, flickering flashes of five-paced signal flares, all crying

out for—

BANG!

Bridgit quickly swiveled her head to check on her brother, but she only caught the slightest glimpse of his blood-soaked collar as he tumbled to the floor, right before—

THWAKK!

The hefty blow of a pistol whip as punishment by the corrupt officer, noticing her sudden movement, itching at the opportunity to let loose.

Her throat choked with tears, but she scrambled away from him, kicking him away, rushing into the kitchen doors, barreling past the officers like a woman on fire. They unflinchingly tackled her to the ground, the side of her head striking the tiled floor.

The ringing still kept on pounding in her ears, but she still tried to look at Evan. She read his lips, which were slowly fading pale. He softly spoke the mantra he told her every day after their parents died. The mantra to keep her steady.

Don't go burning out on me.

A river of blood trickled from his chest.

Don't go burning out on me.

The officers pinned her to the ground further, hands yanking at her hair.

Don't go burning out on me.

Evan broke eye contact with his sister.

Don't go burning out on me!

She screamed, as if that would send the bullet flying back out of his chest and back into the officer's gun. As if she could still fix things. As if she could keep the lights on.

Don't go...

Bridgit felt a heavy blow against the back of her skull.

Don't...

Bridgit felt her consciousness leak away as the pressure subsided. Her blurring vision caught one last sight of her brother's corpse dragged out of the kitchen, before it all turned to black. Before the lights went out. Before the wildfire started.



[52nd Street.]

[Diamond District, Gotham City.]

[Present day.]

[3:18 P.M.]

"This is Gotham PD, we have eyes on the Batman! Repeat, we have eyes on the Batman! Get air support along 61st and 67th, he's airborne!"

FWOO-WHOOSH!

As the officer screamed into his radio, his hat was immediately blown off by a sudden gust of wind. An albatross' shadow barreled across the squadron of cars, tailed by the wide spread of bat wings.

The sun glinted off of Batman's helmet as he flapped his prototype glider-cape, trailing Chuck Brown—the criminal who calls himself "Kite Man"—across the streets of the Diamond District. What was once an ordinary petty thief has now taken to engineering a lightweight hang glider the size of a small swimming pool. Despite it being obscenely eye-catching, gaudy, and adorned with tassels that seemed to serve no other purpose than decoration, it was ironically shaped like a *stealth* bomber jet.

"God, just let me go, Bats! It's not even that big of an issue!"

Batman stayed silent, hurling a hook onto a nearby overpass' green guide sign. He tensed his shoulders and yanked himself forward, propelling his wingsuit through the air to gain more lift.

FWI-WHIPPP!

The two were soaring through the air above the streets of Gotham, while the sharp droning of police sirens followed behind them. His hooks shot out like harpoons, latching onto nearby surfaces as Batman kicked off of walls, diving onto and off of high-rises, and gliding through the afternoon sun, in pursuit of the Kite Man. In the distance, he saw the familiar silhouettes of helicopters, likely called in by the officers below.

"Hey, you see the game last night? Man, Herron was on top of it the whole time!" Kite Man snickered.

Kite Man hurled a pinwheel-shaped, palm-sized projectile at Batman, which quickly unfurled into a giant parachute net. He

swiftly unfurled his serrated bat-thumb, which whipped and cut through the fabric with a **SSSHHHHCRRRK!**

"Damn, I really thought that'd work!" Kite Man cackled.

Upon getting a better look, he saw that Kite Man was carrying a... bag full of groceries. Wait a minute.

Batman tucked his wings, diving below a nearby bridge and vanishing from sight like a ghost.

"You ever let up?! Don't *you* have a family to feed, you \$#@%—" "

Kite Man looked behind him, expecting to see the usual tangle of hooks and kevlar which would be the target of a slough of insults, but he instead found nothing.

"Where'd you go, you big—" "

TTHHHRIKK!

"—AKKGH!"

Said insults were abruptly cut short by a length of electro-magnetized cordage hooking onto his wingsuit and pulling him onto a nearby rooftop and behind a giant billboard, which advertised brand new real estate developments in the Narrows. His landing was rough, but thankfully cushioned by Batman, who ostensibly threw himself in between Kite Man and the ground.

"Nngggg..." Kite Man rubbed his head, tugging at the loose fabric around his arm. Surprisingly, his wingsuit was relatively undamaged.

"That was rude," he muttered. He turned to meet the Bat, ready to punch the fridge-sized vigilante, but was instead met with the bag of groceries gently plopped into his arms.

"You dropped this." Batman said, plainly.

"...Oh. Thanks," Chuck blew a raspberry, checking the bag's contents. They were all safe and sound, somehow. Even the eggs.

"—Hey, wait, what the hell?!" He (almost) shouted, before his mouth was smothered by Batman's glove.

The caped crusader held a finger to his mouth, shushing him. "They've still got choppers searching for me. And you," he whispered. "Lay low for a while."

"Uh... yeah, sure man. Whatever you say." Chuck scoffed and reached into the bag, pulling out a small pouch of chips. He popped it open and began munching on them, talking as he chewed.

"Wammt shhom?" He offered a few to Batman.

"No thanks, I..." he held his palm up to refuse, but paused. "Actually, yeah. Sure."

The two sat down on the rooftop, under the shaded cover of the giant billboard.

"I'm assuming you didn't brutalize me because you're gonna arrest me, or something. That's usually your game, right? Wrassle up the ol' criminal until they beg for mercy, then leave 'em out for the cops?"

"Only if they deserve it."

"Oh, so burglary is fine with you?" Chuck scoffed. "Some hero you are."

"Look, man, it's not like you heisted from the Gotham Museum, or robbed a bank, or even hurt anyone. You stole *groceries*. You're just as much of a victim as the people I try to save."

Chuck let out a long sigh, then giggled a bit. "Damn, you're... not what they say you are, Bats. I like you. If I knew who you were, I'd have invited you to my kid's birthday next week."

Batman let himself laugh back, eating another chip, listening to the police cars pass the two by.

"...Hey, Kite Man?"

"Call me Chuck. But, uh... what's up?"

"Alright, Chuck... you stole from that bougie store from uptown, right? The one in the gentrified neighborhood?"

"Pfft, yeah. What about it?"

"Promise me to steal from it again later. I'll make sure to distract the police. Get your kid a cake for me. Say it's from Batman."

"...Hell yeah."

Chuck took out his phone, wrapping his arm around Batman's shoulders. Bats looked at him like he was crazy, his furrowed brow silently asking him, what are you doing?

"Hey, relax. I'm just taking a photo with the—ow," Chuck flinched from the spikes on Batman's pauldrons. "*—the Batman*, duh."

"...yeah, I can't... I can't do that. Sorry, man."

"Aw, really? Not just one?"

"Really can't risk it."

"Eh, fair enough," Chuck shrugged.

BRRrr—ping!

A notification flashed on Chuck's screen. A news headline. Recent development, it seemed. Gotham's newest domestic terrorist.

He swiped it open, watching the live broadcast unfold. Across town, there was a standoff between a brigade of police officers and a masked vigilante, clad in black-and-orange fireproof armor and a custom-built, mechanized jetpack. A sealed, full-face mask obscured their identity, branded with the logo of a lightning bug. The lenses were the wings, the nose was the thorax, and an LED light covering the mouth resembled the bug's light-producing organ.

"—and we're here live at city councilman Sebastian Hady's estate, where there seems to be a standoff between members of the GCPD and the one known as the 'Firefly Killer,' who's currently holding Hady hostage. They're equipped with what looks to be—"

"...is that a flamethrower?!" Chuck pointed, zooming into the screen. As the Firefly turned to face the newscasters, the flamethrower pressed against Hady's head was brought into view. It was oddly sophisticated, equipped with a glowing-hot knife attached to the end, like a bayonet's blade. The tip was sizzled onto Hady's face, and curling tongues of smoke began to rise from his cheekbone.

"—his motives are as of yet unknown, but an official statement from the commissioner has a \$5,000 reward for anyone who can supply information that would lead to the Firefly's arre—"

BRRRFWWOOSH!

In an instant, the jetpack strapped to the Firefly's back activated, and, holding Hady by the collar of his shirt, the two flew at high speed past the newscasters, leaving a trail of jet-black smoke in their wake.

"God damn!" Chuck exclaimed. "Thank god *you* aren't like that—"

"Hey, rewind a bit," Batman ordered. "I'll tell you when to stop."

Chuck licked his lips and scrolled his thumb across the screen, going frame-by-frame, until...

"There," Batman pointed. "Zoom in."

Though the image was slightly blurred, Bruce could still recognize her. Through the goggle-lenses of the Firefly's mask, he saw it. The burn scar emblematic of the best woman the Narrows had ever known. The pupil that always tried to see how she could help as many people as possible. The eye that Bruce hadn't seen in years; the one that was always wet with tears every time he visited, until the two eventually drifted apart.

The girl who let the lights go out. Bridgit Pike.

"What's wrong, Batman? Recognize the Firefly? Are they an old flame?" Kite Man sneered.

Bruce grimaced. "...something like that."



[*Firebug Community Center.*]

[*Or, at least, the remains of it.*]

[*The Narrows, Gotham City.*]

[*9:55 P.M.*]

"How'd you know I was here, Batman...?"

The Dark Knight stepped into the abandoned, mummified husk of the Firebug Community Center. Graffiti was spray-painted across the walls, depicting clouds of insects swarming a drove of pigs; hands outstretched in solidarity, their palms facing a warm fire; and a *descanso* for the late Evan Pike. Firefly's static-clouded voice echoed through the run-down halls, drowning out Sebastian Hady's muffled cries.

"Written all over your face. You hid your trail well enough for the cops to not follow you. But I knew the destination. I saw it in your eyes."

"You didn't see \$#@%. You still don't. I don't care how you found me, or who you are... It doesn't matter who you are,

because if you're here to save this scum, you're no better than him."

Batman calmly walked forward, past the turned-over tables and discarded sleeping bags. He walked towards what used to be the soup kitchen, before the ceiling caved in.

"You don't see the truth in what I'm doing, Batman. Unlike you, I'm not trying to do the right thing. I'm trying to do the best thing. I'm trying to save this neighborhood, when *no one* else could."

His ears pricked as he picked up a new sound. A low, droning buzz, not unlike that of the fluttering of wings.

"Do you know who this man is?!" Firefly shot out. "If you did, you wouldn't be stopping me right now—you'd be helping me!"

FFRRSSshhh...

"He helped redline the whole hood, from here to the fisheries down south! He's turned family businesses, run for generations, into empty parking lots! Sat back in silence while drugs flooded and poisoned our streets! The people here are dying, and it's because of him! And you're trying to save him?!"

FFRRSSSHREEEK!

"I can't let that happen, Batman... I can't let you stop me—!"

Before Batman realized what hit him, a fireball emerged from the rooftop, engulfing him in hate-hot flames. He was crunched into the floor and dragged out of the building, into the streets, into the sky. Firefly's superheated bayonet blade carved into Batman's armor, hooking him through the air and throwing him into a street lamp with a resounding **KLANG!**

"One life to save a thousand. Maybe more! Stop trying to play *hero* here!" Firefly snarled, lunging forward, jetpack activated, bayonet bared. Batman pivoted, barely dodging the stab, but was swiftly met with a face full of fire, steadily pouring from her flamethrower. The harrowing inferno only touched Batman for a second, but the heat still stung like nothing he'd ever felt before.

"Not like this! *Never* like this!" he shouted back, hurling one of his cape hooks onto the flamethrower and redirecting its stream into the air. He could keep up with her attacks, but he knew that he had to lead her off the streets, and away from the buildings, lest she burn them down too.

Batman reached into his belt and threw a pouch of black powder at Firefly, which ignited into tiny, concussive flashbangs. She reeled back, stunned, as he retreated onto a nearby building, wall-crawling onto it with his cape and hoisting himself onto its rooftop.

"Oh, it's *always* been like this! You've just been too *stagnant*, too *cold* to admit it!" Firefly hissed, activating her jets and launching herself into the air. But by the time she reached the roof, Batman was already gliding away.

Though his glider was exceptionally crafted and built specifically for aerial mobility, it paled in comparison to Firefly's jet wings. Within seconds, Firefly closed the gap, smacking Batman upside the head with her exosuit's plated knuckles, digging into his chin and sending him hurtling into the air.

"Hnng-!" Batman winced in pain. "Maybe I am! But I can't just let you kill a man, no matter how much we both hate him! You don't know me!"

Firefly unhooked a molotov cocktail from her hip, igniting it with her bayonet. As soon as she catapulted it into Batman's face, he shot out a tendinous bat-hook, shattering it into a spray of blazing embers. The hook latched onto Firefly's shoulder before retracting, sending Batman, engulfed in gasoline-lit flames, tackling Firefly mid-air, squeezing his arms around her.

"I *am* you!" Firefly screamed, her propulsion systems sending them haphazardly across the streets of the Narrows, unadjusted for the shifted balancing of weight. "I'm what you're too *scared* to do! I'm the fire that's gonna burn away the *rot* in this city!" She punched, and kicked, and screamed, but Batman's bear hug tightened around her.

"Just please, *listen* to me!" Batman pleaded. "I'm trying to *help* y—AAAGHH!"

Firefly, with her free hand, unsheathed the knife from Batman's cowl, and drove it into his arm, forcing him off of her. She twisted it out and stared at it in her hand for a moment, watching the burned blood drip from its edge, before turning to watch Batman fall into the abandoned skate park. After a second's hesitation, she flew down, grabbing him by the cape right before he hit the ground. Then she set him down, flat on his back, blood trickling onto the floor.

Batman glared up at her, biting off a sheet of gauze from his belt and wrapping it around his upper arm. "Just... please, don't let yourself fall down this path. I did once, and it hurt like hell. But I stopped. So I'm *begging* you, please, don't do this."

Firefly fluttered to the other side of the skate park, across the concrete curvature and dried street art of gang symbols and slogans of hope. As she set her feet down, her back faced towards him, she adjusted the nozzle on her flamethrower.

"Why the hell are you protecting him, Batman? Are you... are you his \$#@% bodyguard or something? What *warmth* has this city ever given you?! Why can't you just accept that they need to be burned to the *ground*?! What could you *possibly* have to gain from this?!"

"It's not what I have to gain, it's..." Batman sighed, shaking his head. "It's what I'm trying to stop you from *losing*. I don't want you to lose *yourself*."

"I'm not about to take advice about '*losing myself*' from a man dressed like a bat." Firefly curled her lip. "...But I can see where you're coming from. I can see that you're... you're just trying to keep me from burning away."

A flicker of hope flashed in Bruce's eyes, as he thought that maybe—just maybe—he was getting through to Bridgit.

"That's why... that's why I'm just gonna tell you this. Please, just walk away," Firefly relented, her back still turned. "Walk away, and pretend like the Batman couldn't save the Firefly from murdering Sebastian Hady. Pretend like this was one crime scene that Batman just... couldn't get to in time. And help me save this neighborhood."

...Thoomp. Thoomp. Thoomp.

Batman's boots slowly marched towards Firefly. He didn't want to walk away.

"...I thought so," she sniffled.

FWRREEEEEEOOOOOOSSH!!!

Firefly let loose a torrent of dragon-like flames, scorching away the graffiti. The multicolor words of love and pride, of wishes for a better future, of gentle, loving affirmations that the Narrows would recover.

The maelstrom blasted its way towards Batman, who quickly detached the axe blade from his chest, holding it

parallel to his face, and using it to block the brunt of the flames. Most of his body was now shrouded, wrapped, and protected in his cape, but the unrelenting heat was already beginning to affect him. The smoke wormed its way into his lungs, and Batman's head slowly started to spin. Still, he advanced forward.

Firefly took a terrified step back as she watched the outline of the man march toward her, inundated in flames. The outline of the man who'd inspired her on this blistering, blazing campaign to save the Narrows. To burn away that dim, inky blackness in her soul. To avenge Evan Pike. Though her mask shielded her from the flames, she could still feel the rush of boiling blood in her head.

Five steps away. It was excruciating, painful, and devastating. Like feeling your skin crackle away like the crust of bread in a wood-fired oven.

Four steps away. Batman still moved forward, ready to make right what was wrong.

Three steps away. Bruce still moved forward, ready to save his friend.

Two steps away—

FWWWwwwuuushhhtt...

Firefly turned her flamethrower off, and stared at Batman, who was smoldering from the flames. He tried to catch what little breath he still had, coughing out the smoke and soot that clogged his throat.

She stared down the crisped-up death-marcher, her eyes darting across his blasted armor. Her voice quivered, like it did the days of her parents' and brother's funerals. "Wh... why...? Why are you doing this?"

Batman hesitated for a second, not knowing if he wanted to take the risk. But if it would save his friend, he decided that whatever his "secret identity" meant to him wasn't as important as helping someone who forgot her own identity. Someone who lost herself.

Bruce detached his cowl, his eyes red with evaporated tears.

"Because people still care about you, Bridgit. Because... because I still care about you."

She stared at him in a mixture of abject horror and tangerine-tinted nostalgia. It was, for lack of a better analogy,

like seeing your best friend for the first time in years dressed as a giant bat.

"...B-Bruce?"

Bridgit, almost instinctively, pulled her own mask off. Her hands moved on their own, still shaking from the whole ordeal. The oxygen hissed from the ventilation systems, but she held her breath unconsciously. She scratched at her burn scar with her thumb.

"I was there, you know...? Watching... watching him get..." Bruce muttered under his breath. "I could just stare through the window. I couldn't... do anything. But I wanted to. And I hurt every damn night just thinking about how I wanted to burn it all down. Just like you."

He sighed, his breath shortened and quivering from the immolation. "But you don't have to burn it down, Bridgit. I know it *hurts*. I know how it feels to *lose* someone. I know how it feels to lash out at this damn world, how it feels to *burn* uncontrollably. Like hot coals, *searing* behind your eyes. You get so furious that the tears start turning to *steam*..." Bruce said, brushing the scorched hair out of his own eyes.

"I'm not going to act like I know better than you. Hell, just look at me," he chuckled, gesturing to the colossal slab of black steel that he reattached onto his chest. The faintest wisp of a smile flickered across Bridgit's face. "...but I know that I didn't want this. It took me so long to realize..." He hesitated for a second, choosing his next words carefully.

"Remember what your brother always said? How... a wildfire was never gonna warm this city up?"

Bruce shrugged off his spiked pauldrons, letting them clatter to the ground with a **THUNK**. His expression softened, his tears carving rivulets across his quivering cheekbones.

Bridgit stepped back in shock, but was stopped in her tracks. Stopped by the arms of a friend around her, stopped by the embrace of the Bat's wings. Stopped by her walls crumbling around her, collapsing to the ground. The inferno blazed within her, raging against the urge to push him away, to retreat back into her own smoke and burn away into ash.

The Firefly wanted to fly away. But Bridgit hugged him back. She decided to leave the lights on for a little while.

"...It would take a hearth," Bridgit smiled.



[Firebug Community Center.]

[The Narrows, Gotham City.]

[A few days before Christmas.]

[2:50 P.M.]

“Bridgit, order up! One serving of broccoli cheddar!” Bruce called out, ringing the bell. They expected the holiday season to be busy, but the amount of people coming to the Firebug Community Center was unprecedented. Entire extended families from across the Narrows visited, gathering to celebrate the holidays with a warm bowl of soup.

It’s definitely not like how it used to be. There was still rebuilding to do: patch up the walls, fix the broken windows, and get some better tables and chairs, among other monumental tasks. But Batman always builds back. And Bruce helped Bridgit build back, too.

It’s a community effort, though. Everyone from the old blind vet, to the kindly sushi store owner across the street, to good old Chuck Brown and his son, all pitched in what they could, be it labor, funds, or just a letter of thanks. Thanks for returning to the community center. Thanks for trying to help the Narrows. Thanks for keeping the lights on.

ABSOLUTE FLASH





Flashback

Silver Penny

**PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY.
YEARS AGO.**

Barry reads the email twice through and then he reads it again, carefully this time, going line-by-line instead of skimming for the problem; Iris would be proud. He's at the Dean's office a handful of minutes later, and Hannah waves him right through without protest or an appointment. She doesn't even look at him.

He ignores the soft clatter of typing and the soft visitors' chairs to storm straight up to Max's desk. "I told you last week that we only need to remain on the university's computing network for a couple more months; after that, we won't require the same resource load."

"Dr. Allen," Max starts.

"Barry," he interrupts. "It's Barry, like always."

"Barry," Max repeats. "How can I help you?"

Barry stares at him. The email is still rattling in his ears. Hannah wouldn't look him in the eyes.

"You can't do this," he says. Max watches him, placid. "I have the grants, I have the equipment, everything's running as well as can be expected, the students are halfway through their projects, I—I have tenure." Barry gets the creeping sense that he could spill his guts right here and nothing would move, that he's already a ghost in the machine.

"I'm afraid that's not the problem at hand." He's Dean Crandall through and through, all administrator and not the scientist who sends Barry papers at six in the morning. "That

decision has already been made; it's no longer up for discussion."

"What do you mean, discussion?" In lieu of rolling up his sleeves, Barry plants his fists on his hips. He can feel himself leaning forward with the force of it. "None of this was ever brought in front of me. I deserve the chance to defend my work."

"Be that as it may—" Max says steadily.

"We're doing good work for you," Barry interrupts. Distantly, he can hear his voice rising. "We're doing good work for Princeton: showy, productive work, the kind of thing that wins over donors and Congressmen. You know that. I know that. Don't pretend it's not true."

"Of course it's true," Max says, not unkindly, and finally he stands and comes around the great wooden desk to lean back against it and study Barry with an empathy that burns worse than all the pretty words about profit and loss. "You're an excellent researcher and it's an honor to name you among our faculty."

"What the heck is going on, Max?" Barry won't beg, but he's getting close. "You can't shut me down like this."

"It's out of my hands," Max says plainly. "I was able to get you until the end of the year to close out. You're a good scientist, Barry; you'll land on your feet."

"And my students?"

"No one will touch your students," he says. "You're welcome to take them if they want to go, but their funding here will remain."

Barry digs his fingers into the palms of his hands. "Max—Max—"

"I got you everything I could." Max rounds back and returns to his seat. "You have until the end of the year."

And then there's a student knocking on the doorframe, eyes darting hesitantly between them, and Hannah looking over her shoulder into the office. Barry knows when he's dismissed.



He makes for Meena's office next, and, when he finds it empty and dark, finds himself beating the pathway down to her lab. He turns off before he can get there, following the sound of

voices and chalk staccato against a blackboard: she's in a conference room with her students, half-drawn ideas thrown up on the board and a low chatter rising and falling through the glass.

Barry makes himself stop and lean up against the wall, waiting. The lattices over the board are a far cry from his own, but he doesn't doubt they'll work. She looks up and catches his eye, and after her students are done tumbling out the door, he goes and joins her.

Barry closes the door behind him and crosses the room to hoist himself up on the table, ignoring Meena's raised eyebrows.

"What's up?" she asks.

Barry drums his fingers against the cheap wood. He glances out into the hallway again, but it's still empty. The door is closed. "If I needed a favour—" he starts.

"Yeah, of course," Meena says. She tilts her head to the side. "Barry, what's going on?"

Is it really that obvious? He hopes not. "Hypothetically," he says slowly, "if something were to happen to my lab...could you, um. How many of my students could you take?"

Meena straightens, dropping her chalk on the ledge behind her. "Is something wrong?"

"Hypothetically," Barry stresses. "Extremely hypothetically."

"Like...hypothetically our new experiment will allow us to isolate the primary resonance of concern, or hypothetically Robles' new equipment is unrelated to the recent visits A.R.G.U.S. has been making to his lab?"

"The second one." He should talk to Robles, too. "Definitely the second one."

"Holy quantum Hall," she mutters. "Do you know if—"

"I don't know anything," he says. "I really, really, don't know anything. We got approved on everything like usual, I don't—the students, Meena. Can you take them?"

She doesn't hesitate. "Three at most. First and second years, if they're willing to switch projects. Barry—"

"That'll be fine," he says. He can't think too hard about this right now or he'll throw up. "They're bright kids."

"All your students are brilliant." Meena waves a hand. "I'm not concerned about them."

"And Avery," he says. "One of them needs to be Avery."

Meena frowns. "Avery's work is closer to Ryan's. She's in too deep to switch gears, and he's in a much better position to support her."

"Maybe," Barry allows. "But he won't. You know he won't. It's got to be you, Meena." She makes a face. "You know I'm right."

"Hypothetically," she reminds him.

"Well?"

"All right," she agrees. "I'll make sure Avery's taken care of."

"Thank you." He's glad he sat down when he arrived; the worst of the jangling, terrifying drive is gone, and in its place he's starting to feel faintly dizzy. He closes his eyes, but that makes it worse and he opens them again, staring directly into Meena's concern.

"Do you want a coffee?"

"Oh, yes, please." This is why he likes her so much. As he watches, she reaches up to the top of the blackboard and comes back with a couple of the little foil cups. "Do you bring your own coffee?"

Meena scoffs. "I have a staff contact." She grins and tosses one in his direction. Barry flails off of the table catching it. "He does the ordering and trades them for fast-tracking his paperwork."

"You're amazing." He follows her out the door and they punch their cups into the machine and retrieve piping hot coffee in return.

She stands next to him in silence and sips at her drink, both hands wrapped around her mug, and doesn't ask any questions about all his requests. It gives him the space to really think for the first time about what's happening, what that means, and what he has to do about it.



The trees are stubbornly holding on when he leaves that evening, leaves in dark rich reds and yellows hanging down from the branches that arc over Washington. He spots Iris from across the way before she sees him, stuffing her notebook back into her bag while she walks, and he speeds up a little to meet her on the corner.

"Hey!" She lights up and hugs him when he throws his arms out, and Barry can already feel himself starting to smile, even with the whole day still pressing down on him. "You're out early."

"Yeah," Barry says. "It happens."

"It does not happen," Iris says, reaching up to tug his blazer straight. "But I'll take it."

His hand finds hers swinging between them, and when they round the corner and the clearing is empty he breathes a little sigh of relief. "Can we sit for a moment?"

This is what Iris likes to call *tellingly uncharacteristic* of him, and she eyes him up carefully in response, but only nods her head. They're settled on a bench under the yellowing evening light, the wind pushing faint shadows over Iris' face, before she asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Barry lies. "How was your day?"

Iris tilts her head back, throwing an arm out. "Highs and lows. Got a really good lead on the interview I need for this Middleton story, so I'm hoping that will pan out."

"That's great," Barry says. "That's really fantastic, Iris. You're going to knock it out of the park."

She sighs, unimpressed. "I can guess at what's wrong, if you want."

"No." He shakes his head. "I'm sorry. This is, um"—he stops and spins a finger around, implicating the tall buildings with their shadowed halls, the faint noise of students hustling from place to place, the old trees close to winter—"I've been told that this might not...work out."

Iris is tense. He didn't mean to scare her. "What *exactly* won't work out?"

"The job," Barry says slowly. "My work—my research. There's been some"—he doesn't even know who Max's shadowy *they* is—"institutional pushback."

"That's not an answer," Iris says, but she relaxes against the back of the bench a little now that he hasn't said anything about them. Barry swallows hard and breathes against the nausea.

"They're going to fire me, Iris," he says. "Or the equivalent—strip my funding and my operating approvals and force me out."

It pulls her up short, but only for a moment. It's a little gratifying, Barry's shock and anger from earlier reflected back at him. "You've got tenure."

"Yeah," he agrees.

"They can't just—"

"I've got tenure," he says slowly, picking through what he figured out sitting in the break room all afternoon. "So they can't just dismiss me. They're going to say I faked my data. Or that I plagiarized something in, I don't know, last year's *Nature*. It might be messy, but it'll be effective."

"You didn't do that," Iris says. "So it won't stand. We'll run an investigation, if we have to. The truth will rise to the top, Barry; it always does."

"People will talk." Barry can already think of half a dozen colleagues who would muddle the truth for half his budget. "It doesn't matter if it's true or not and it doesn't matter if you can prove it either way. Everything runs on reputation."

Iris' hand is on the side of his face, turning him to face her. "Stop spiraling," she says sharply.

"We'll figure this out."

If it was just the job, he wouldn't feel so sick. Barry closes his eyes, tilting his head in until he can feel the heat of Iris' forehead against his own. "Iris." When he peeks, he can tell she's already figured out what he's going to say. He has to say it anyway. "You can't marry a guy who fabricated his own experimental results."

"I'm not." Her hand comes down to rest at the back of his head, holding Barry tightly to her.

"We're going to figure this out, honey. Together. I'm not walking away because someone's spreading baseless rumours about your work."

Barry doesn't move. It's only talk now, but one day soon it's going to mean something more than that, and he'd pack his bags and move back to Kansas before he let it ruin her career. He would—he will. "You're going to win a Pulitzer, Iris. You're going to break the story of the century. You can't give that up."

She just scoffs. "I'm not, and I'm not giving you up, either." Finally, she lets go, and they rearrange knee-to-knee on the bench, a chill starting to rise as the sun dips under tall buildings. "I'm in this business because the truth matters. Trust that the important things will always come to light."

"I trust you," Barry says. "But tell me honestly that people care about the truth. In this world..."

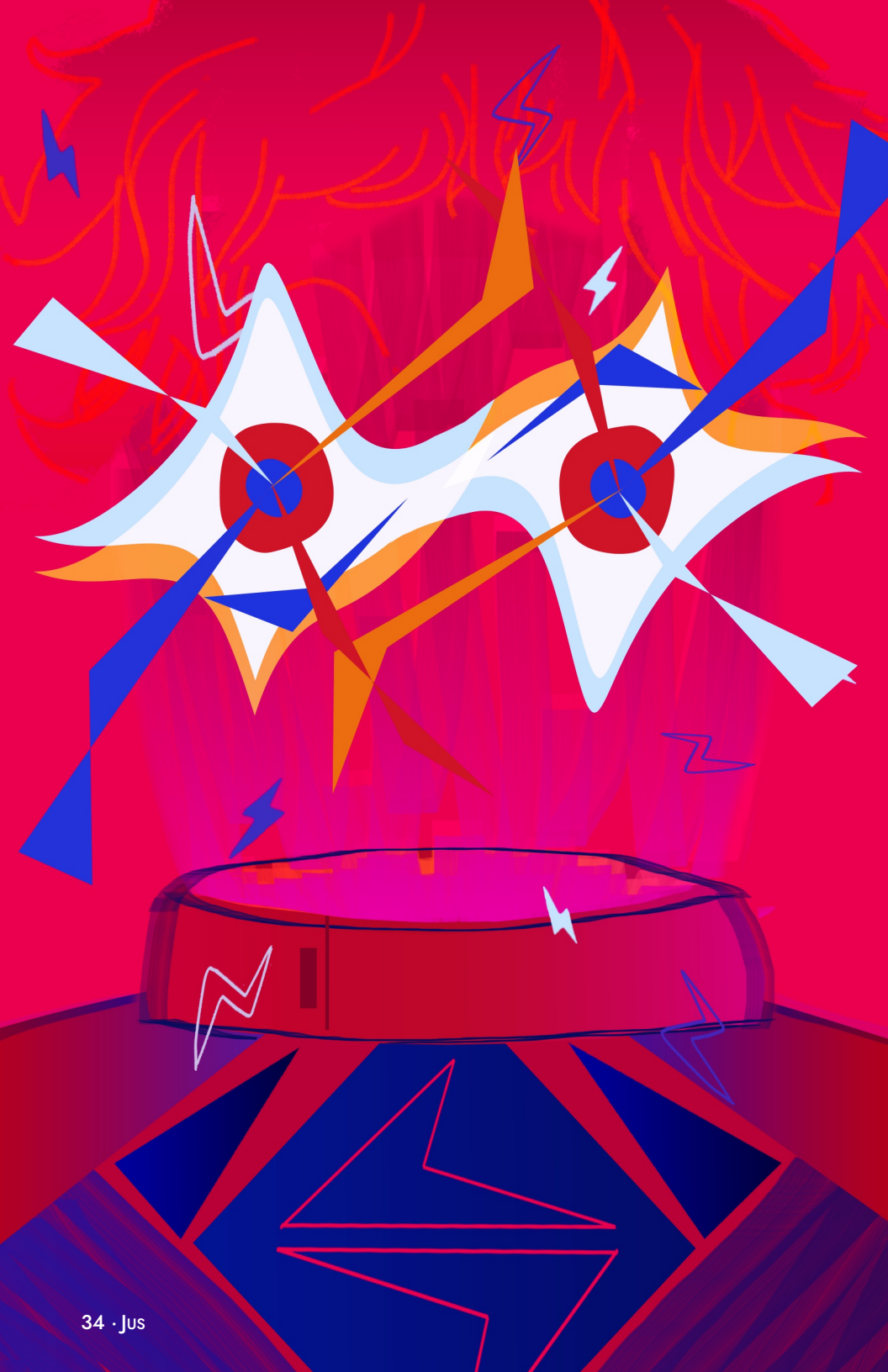
If he thought he had any chance of fighting it, he'd be in the President's office right now, but Max's eyes over the desk told a definitive story. Barry can feel it in his spine and in the soles of his shoes: there's only one way this whole mess is going to end. Mom'll be happy to have his help at Thanksgiving.

"You care," Iris says. She taps at his nose. "Up in your ivory tower all day, trying to crack open the truths of the universe."

"Down in the basement, you mean." He drops his head to rest on his arm propped up on the back of the bench. Suddenly, the whole day is a weight against his chest and he looks unseeingly up into the clear sky, hoping Iris can't see it hit him.

He thinks of the lab, with its low humming and endless hubbub, everyone trying and failing and straining to the next moment of clarity. Chalk dust falling down in even columns, Avery striking the board almost too hard in her eagerness to lay out the solution in a way he can see. That little shift in the world when the numbers line up, the data becomes clear, and everything's a little bit brighter.

Iris' hand comes to rest on his knee. Barry breathes in and then lets it all go.



Run For Your Life

A lonely boy with just one friend
A quiet world, a simple end
But they took it all one faded day
And nothing since has been the same

Just one road left for him to take

The past is dust beneath his feet
The future's out of reach, beyond this street
The present hunts him, sharp and true
And time is running out, running through

Run boy, for they are coming after you
Run boy, for you are all alone
Run boy, for no one's here to save you
Run boy, the end is crawling nearer

A bitter cold began to bite
A thread of gold, a trail of light
Misfortune, like a boomerang coming up behind
Trickery, playing tricks upon his mind
The weather turned to hide the way
A heatwave made mirages play

A monkey's paw to share the load
But still the ghosts stalk down the road
What if the path just falls apart
What if they fail before they start

The ground is shaking, legs grow weak
A silent prayer is all he speaks
But in the dark, a stubborn beat from his heart
The frantic rhythm, as everything falls apart
The past is dust beneath his feet

The future's out of reach, beyond this street
The present hunts him, sharp and true
And time is running out, running through

Run boy, for they are coming after you
Run boy, for you are all alone
Run boy, for no one's here to save you
Run boy, the end is crawling nearer

You're running out of time

Lullabies and Lost Friends

Phantatrix

The ground rose far too quickly for Wally West to react, a substantial feat against the fastest boy alive. Reeling from the shock of the impact, he hadn't realized his palms and knees were scraped from sliding across the asphalt but by the time he would've noticed his injuries, they were already healed. The stars in his vision took longer to dissipate though. He silently cursed himself for this sudden setback. If he were correct in his assumptions, and unfortunately he was, then he didn't make it very far from his last encounter with the Rogues at all— he wound up in Keystone City, one of the twin cities with Central City!

Great. Dusting himself off, he took a few deep breaths like how his mom taught him. His stomach rumbled. He'd have to start looking for food in the next city after he'd set up enough distance between himself and his pursuers. Whatever he ate at Ralph's shelter would have to last him until then.

His backpack laid haphazardly some distance away.

'Grodd!' He shouted telepathically.

Quickly, the teen opened the bag to check on his friend only to be met with the red and black of his costume. He scanned the surrounding area hoping to find some sort of sign as to where Grodd could have gone. The clock ticked menacingly in his mind. He had to find Grodd before the Rogues found either of them. After the encounter with Heat Wave, he hoped he bought himself enough time.

'Grodd! Answer me!'

Wally changed into his costume and zipped further into the city, away from the crowded areas. He wasn't sure how far out Grodd's telepathy extended but he couldn't have gone too far

after being thrown from a backpack, could he? Wally mentally cried out again and still no response. Where could he have gone? The teen scoped out various possible hiding spots nearby and called for Grodd only to be met with psychic silence again and again. For someone who constantly begged for his mind to quiet down, Wally never knew how awful that silence would sound now. Maybe Grodd was injured badly or unconscious? Maybe he was... no, he didn't want to think that. He couldn't be dead. Not when he needed him, too. Not when he was the only friend he had since the accident.

Deep breaths. Focus. Find Grodd then get out of the city as fast as possible.

The continual silence made Wally's heart hammer in his chest. He didn't imagine the people here would take kindly to a green monkey with an exposed brain. His legs reacted before his brain could process what he was doing but the cramping in his stomach stopped him in his tracks. A wave of dread washed over him, the epiphany clear now. Whatever energy he had left was draining by the second.

But...he couldn't stop, that wasn't an option.

Wally wasn't quite sure what his top speed was but he knew that that was where he had been pushing himself ever since he got his powers. Okay then, maybe just under the speed of sound for now? That's fast enough to search for Grodd before he could draw attention to himself and then he'd kick it into high gear once they were reunited.

A few more deep breaths to quell his racing mind and protesting stomach and he took off through the streets and alleyways. As a military brat, he'd lived in various cities and small towns but each metroplex he had stayed at had overwhelmed him with its sprawling, towering size, as if it would swallow him up before anyone would even notice he was gone.

A flash of a green tail caught Wally's eye. He backtracked to follow it. He turned the corner into the alley and felt it more so than heard it: a song so gentle it was almost like falling asleep. He swayed in place, unable to move his body, eyes anchored to Grodd's tail being quickly tucked into the folds of a large, dark green cloak by a black, gloved hand.

What was happening to him? Did Fort Fox already know he was here? Was this one of the Rogues?

When Wally felt in control again, he raced towards the stranger in a flash only to slam into the wall of music anchoring him in place, mind drifting into the sweet melodies. And so this stupid game continued between Wally and the stranger: Wally would pursue the stranger and then Wally would wind up trapped by the stranger's enchanted song and then Wally would watch as the stranger carried Grodd further and further away from him.

This had to end.

There was nothing else left to do but to outrun the music. With one burst of supersonic speed, the teen rocketed after Grodd's captor. As quickly as he caught the culprit, his legs faltered and the three of them tumbled a dozen blocks away.

"Grodd!" Wally shouted out loud. The green monkey sleepily blinked his eyes open. The stranger laid sprawled out on the ground, the hood of his cloak forced back from the impact to reveal a face far younger than Wally had expected, a boy not much older than he was, pretty much the same age if he had to guess. Long red hair tied back, a light green bandana with white polka dots pulled up over his mouth, light green sunglasses cracked at the edge. Without the cloak to obscure him, he could see the rest of his outfit: a black tank top, dark green utility pants and black, scuffed combat boots. He was much scrawnier than how the large cloak made his silhouette out to be.

Wally, holding Grodd close, carefully approached the boy. The boy groaned awake as he sat up, and then quickly patted at his ears with one hand. Locking eyes with the speedster, he pulled down his bandana with his other hand. Faster than the green-clad boy could blink, Wally clasped his hand over his mouth with an iron grip, the other boy couldn't rip his hand off of him.

"Wait! Don't sing or whatever it is you do! I just want to talk."

Being so close, Wally finally noticed what the boy had patted at his ears for. Hearing aids.

"Are they working? Can you hear me?" Wally asked slowly, loosening his grip over the boy's mouth. He took the opportunity to fully wrest Wally's hands off of his mouth, annoyed.

"Yeah, yeah they work. No thanks to you," the boy spat. "Are you here to drag me and the monkey back to Project

Olympus?" His eyes glowered.

Wally shook his hands frantically. "No, no, no! I thought you were with Project Olympus and were gonna take Grodd back there."

"What? No! You're the one wearing that uniform Doctor Allen always had displayed and kept following me."

Wally blinked dumbfoundedly. "You knew Barry?"

The boy paused. "I knew of him," he finally answered. His shoulders dropped, tension easing from his body a bit. "I'm Hartley Rathaway, by the way."

"Wally. Wally West." The redhead stuck out his hand in introduction.

"West? Like Colonel— We need to leave now!"

From the reflection of one of the glass buildings near them, a figure of yellow and black flew ominously in their direction. The Rogues were here and Golden Glider was ready to collect her prize. Wally tucked Grodd into his backpack and the two boys sprinted down the alley.

Golden Glider was gaining on them, fury in her eyes. She shouted into her radio device on her suit, "I found the West boy and Grodd! They're with the Piper!"

As the distance between the trio and their pursuer shrank, Hartley looked over at Wally, fierce determination in his eyes. "Don't slow down for my sake, Speedy! Go!"

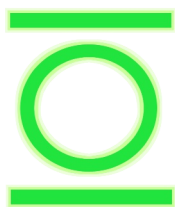
"I can't leave you behind!"

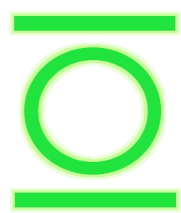
"I'll be fine! I'll buy you some time, just run!" Hartley shouted as he skid to a halt. Wally began to accelerate, the world around him blurring and turning silent as he outran the bustling sights and sounds of the city.

Countless miles away, Wally West tore through the countryside, stomach aching, veins flowing with adrenaline, lightning crackling around him. There would be no rest for this runaway. Silently, he wished he had the strength and stamina to have carried his new friend away from the Rogues. All he could do now was hope that Hartley wasn't lying when he said he would be fine.

Maybe they'll meet again, Wally hoped. It would be nice to have someone else on his side in this endless chase.

ABSOLUTE GREEN LANTERN





This place is not

no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here

nothing valued is here.





BE WITHOUT



Fallen Star

To understand is but a fool's false gold
And thought, when turned to deed, is yet too green
To hold all feeling back, a red flag once bold
True knowledge is a black star none can glean

It fell from the stars, to turn our world to ash
For days our fragile structures fell apart
Till few remained to see the dawn's new flash
A hand of darkness reaching for coloured marks, a new start

A woman bold, of formidable will, stands fast
While one man is by entropy's slow grasp consumed
Another rages, first to vanish from the cast
One more command that fear be utterly subdued

The first days have passed, yet more is still to come
As Omega and Alpha call them home
A promised hope, or else a fatal sum
It takes all will to stand, and not to roam

So must they bear the pressure and the dread
And walk the path where they are led

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Absolute Justice

The world at her fingertip
Reaching for the gods to grip
Of a single woman she was scared
Her a monster, she declared
While forming a villain team on her trip

Immortal he may be
Empty everyone can see
An heir he desperately needs
Yet misfortune always spoils his seeds
The world will pay his fee

A woman seeks to control time
But a simple lad past her could climb
Now she rages on to get it back
But her goons only show up an empty sack
Then she'll be without a dime

Rich bastard who can buy anything
Well, except for a special kind of ring
Arrogance may be his fatal flaw
He wants to bring the world to awe
Alas he will never be the king

Never a smile on his face, only a frown
Why so serious, when he looks like a clown
Barely contained spite and rage
He'll take it out on anyone in this age
Standing tall, never will he go down
A smug man who flew ever higher
Sought to set the whole world on fire
Smashing foes with his warlike appeals
Smashing friends with his ideals
In the sky, a tyrant for folk to admire

Broken Arrow

A hero is dead
Never to save anyone
The world moves on, grey

Stuck in his old ways
He seeks a change, make amends
A broken arrow

Green hood blood stained, lost
Someone else left to fight on
A heavy burden

The flowers of the Absolute Universe

Flower meanings, folklore powers gathered from The Complete Language of Flowers (A definitive and illustrated history) by S. Theresa Dietz.

M: meaning

P: Powers (if they have them)

F: for extra facts/folklore tidbits that may fit

Some flowers have many meanings, that may contradict themselves, I shall be writing down the meanings that I feel like fit the most



Asclepias/Milkweed M: hope in misery

The main Universe as a whole



Chilean Bellflower M: there is no complete and unreserved good, there is no unalloyed good

The Justice League



Castanea/Chestnut M: do me justice, independence, injustice, luxury

Bruce Wayne/Batman



Borago officinalis/Borage
M: abruptness, bluntness, bravery, rudeness



Calendula officinalis/Common Marigold
M: affection, constructive loss, cruelty, despair, fidelity, grace, grief, health, joy, longevity, pain, trouble, sacred affection



Clematis/leather flower M: artifice, ingenuity, love, mental beauty, (evergreen version of it: poverty, want)



Carduus M: austerity, harshness, independence, retaliation, sternness



Vetiver M: harmony, justice, righteousness
P: anti-theft, friendship, gifts, luck,



Cannabis sativa/Hemp
M: fate, hardness, roughness



Prickly Pear/Paddle cactus
M: I did not forget, I burn



job's tears M: survived great suffering P: healing, luck, wishes



Any evergreen
M: poverty and worth



Mourning widow/Dusky Cranebill
M: melancholy, sadness, sorrows



Blackthorn/Spice
M: austerity, blessing to come after challenge, challenges ahead, constraint, difficulty, inevitability, preparation, strife

Kal-EI



Abies/Fir
M: elevation, friendship, height, honesty, longevity, manifestation, time, perceptiveness, remembrance, resilience, F: the needles of a younger abies are sharper



Adonis/Flos Adonis/Pheasant's eyes
M: Painful and sorrowful recollections, sad memories



Ajuga/Bugleweed
M: cheers the heart, lovable



Autumn leaves
M: melancholy



Jello's tears M: survived great suffering, P: healing, luck, wishes



Lily-of-the-valley
M: good luck, purity of heart, humility, return of happiness, sweetness, trustworthiness



Azadirachta indica/Neem tree
M: complete, freedom, imperishable, life, noble, perfect, the cure



Saffron
M: ancient symbol of the sun, beware of excess, cheerfulness, do not abuse, happiness, north
P: healing, laughter, raise up spirits, strength



Calendula officinalis/Common Marigold
M: affection, constructive loss, cruelty, despair, fidelity, grace, grief, health, joy, longevity, pain, trouble, sacred affection



Cedrus libani/Turkish cedar/Cedar of Lebanon
M: incorruptibility, incorruptible



Any evergreen
M: poverty and worth

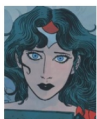


Lithops/living stones
M: hiding in plain sight, resilience, survival



Forget-me-not
M: clinging to the past, do not forget me, faithfulness, memories, remembrance

Diana of Themyscira/Wonder Woman



Abies/Fir
M: elevation, friendship, height, honesty, longevity, manifestation, time, perceptiveness, remembrance, resilience, F: the needles of a younger abies are sharper



Clematis/leather flower M: artifice, ingenuity, love, mental beauty,



Orange rose
M: enthusiasm, fascination, passion, pride, wonder



Acacia/yellow Acacia/Mimosa
M: endurance of the soul, platonic love, chaste love, concealed love, elegance, friendship, immortality, purity, resurrection, sensitiveness
M: abundance, advancement, banishing, conscious will, divination, energy, growth, healing, joy, leadership, love, life, natural power, prophetic dreams, protection, repel demons and ghosts



Alettris farinosa/unicon root
M: complete, powerful
P: breaks hexes, gain protection from good spirits, keeps evil away, reversing negative spells



Ajuga/Bugleweed
M: cheers the heart, lovable



Arum lily/Calla Lily
M: Beauty and the price gained from shared wisdom over time, panache, religion, transition and growth
P: declaration of religiousness, spirituality



Garden Cress
M: always reliable, power, roving, stability



Calendula officinalis/Common Marigold
M: affection, constructive loss, cruelty, despair, fidelity, grace, grief, health, joy, longevity, pain, trouble, sacred affection

Sojourner Mullein/Green Lantern

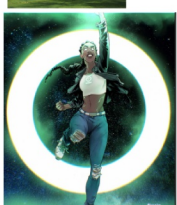
Good King-Henry/Poor Man's asparagus
M: goodness, P: leadership, charisma
F: Gold/green dyes can be obtained from the whole plant



Vetiver M: harmony, justice, righteousness
P: anti-theft, friendship, gifts, luck,



Cedrus libani/Turkish cedar/Cedar of Lebanon
M: incorruptibility, incorruptible



White Oak
M: endurance, noble presence (specifically leaves: bravery, strength, welcome)



Yellow Lily
M: falsehood, gay, i'm walking on air

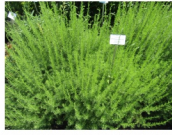


Campanula rotundifolia/Bluebell
M: gratitude, grief, retirement, P: luck, truth

Wally West/The Flash



Ajuga/Bugleweed
M: cheers the heart, lovable



Artemisia abrotanum/Boy's love
M: absence, bantering, constancy, fidelity, jest, jesting, pain



Coffee tree
M: alertness, camaraderie, friendship, sociability



Cardamine/bittercresses
M: paternal error



Freesia
M: childish, fidelity, immature, innocence, trust



Narcissus/Daffodil
M: beauty, deceitful hopes, forgiveness, new beginnings, inner beauty, rebirth, self-love, sunshine, uncertainty



Pine M: boldness, courage, daring, endurance, hope, pity, time



Pilewort
M: escape, future joy, happiness, joys to come, protection



Helleborus/Christmas rose
M: anxiety, relief, relieve my anxiety, wit



Sword lily
M: give me a break, I'm sincere, vibrancy

John Jones



Cardamine/bittercresses
M: paternal error



Iris
M: courage, faith, fire/flame, good news, hope, I am burning with love, idea, I have a message for you, promise, valor, travel, victory and conquest but also pain, wisdom
P: authority, faith, power, protection from evil spirits,



Cypress vine/Star glory
M: busybody, protection



Flanders poppy/Field poppy
M: avoidance of problems, consolation, ephemeral charms, good and evil, imagination, life and death, light and darkness, love, oblivion
P: attitude, clear thinking, harmony, higher understanding, logic, love, luck, manifestation in material form, spiritual concepts, thought process



Pomegranate
M: compassion, good luck and good things, marriage, mysteriousness, resurrection, suffering, summer



Beetleweed/Wandflower
M: challenges of a loving marriage, love



Abutilon/Indian Mallow
M: enlightenment



Martian

Delphinium/Lark's claw
M: ability to transcend the bounds of space and time, airy, an open heart, tickleless, fun, big-hearted, fun, levity, lightness



Papaver orientale/Poppy
M: dreaminess, imagination oblivion



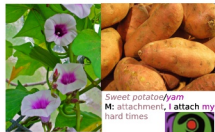
Betula/Birch
M: adaptability, dreams, elegance, grace, growth, initiation, renewal, stability, transformation
P: astral travel, protection, purification



Acacia Senegal/Arabic Gum
M: platonic love
P: protection, psychic powers, purification, purify evil and negativity, wards off evil, F: a strip of this plant above your bed on a hat will supposedly ward off evil, the plant will purify an area of evil and negativity



Agrimonia eupatoria/Agrimonia
M: gratitude, thankfulness
P: banish entities and negative energy, barrier against negative energies, break hexes, protection against evil, psychic attacks and poison, reverse spells



Sweet potato/yam
M: attachment, I attach myself to you, hard times



Kennedy
M: intellectual and mental beauty



Grodd



Cheiranthus cheiri/The wallflower
M: adversity, bliss, bonds of affection;
faithful and fidelity in adversity and misfortune,
friendship, misfortune



Pilewort
M: escape,
future joy,
happiness,
joys to come,
protection



Oregano
M: will banish sadness, soothing



Sweet potatoes/rym
M: attachment,
I attach myself to you,
hard times



Job's tears
M: survived great suffering
P: healing, luck, wishes



Common snowdrop/Fair maids of february
M: consolation, friend in adversity and need,
hope, hope in sorrow,



Yucca/Adam's needle
M: a friend in need, best friends

Circe

Acacia/Yellow Acacia/Mimosa
M: endurance of the soul, platonic love,
chaste love, concealed love, elegance,
friendship, immortality, purity, resurrection,
sensitiveness
M: abundance, advancement, banishing,
conscious will, divination, energy, growth,
healing, joy, leadership, love, life,
natural power, prophetic dreams, protection,
repel demons and ghosts



Cinquefoil/silverweed
M: beloved child, care of the young,
maternal affection, parental love, the dead



Cactaceae/Cactus
M: Ardent love, bravery, endurance,
maternal love, my heart dreams come to fruition,
protection, warmth, you left me
F: cacti grown indoors will protect from intrusions,
plant it outside the home in all 4 directions to protect it

Agrimonia eupatoria/Agrimonia
M: gratitude, thankfulness
P: banish entities and negative energy,
barrier against negative energies,
break hexes, protection against evil,
psychic attacks and poison, reverse spells

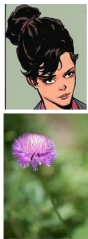


Bryophyta/Moss
M: ennui, maternal love
P: binding, change, courage,
liberation, lucky, mercy



Allium Cepa/Onion (the flower)
M: emotional release, multi-layered protection
P: exorcism, healing, prophetic dreams,
spiritual cleansing and spirituality
F: used to be hanging above doors
by early american settlers to protect from infections,
apparently can be used to help
with divination when one needs to make a decision

Martha Wayne



Allium tuberosum/Chinese chives
M: courage, strength



Alnus/Alder
M: giving, nurturing



Azelea/Thinking of Home Bush
M: fragile, modest, passion, patient,
take care, take care of yourself for me,
temperance, womanhood



Cactaceae/Cactus
M: Ardent love, bravery, endurance,
maternal love, my heart dreams come
to fruition, protection, warmth,
you left me
F: cacti grown indoors will protect
from intrusions, plant it outside the
home in all 4 directions to protect it

Centaurea moschata/Sweet sultan
M: Felicity, happiness, widowhood



Cinquefoil/silverweed
M: beloved child, care of the young,
maternal affection, parental love, the dead



Cistus Ladanifer/Brown-eyed rockrose
M: I shall die tomorrow

Waylon Jones



Anemone/Wind Flower
M: abandonment, abiding love,
anticipation, being forsaken,
estrangement, expectation, fading youth,
health, illness, refusal, sickness, sincere,
staunch love, suffering and death,
withered hopes

Cheiranthus cheiri/The wallflower
M: adversity, bliss, bonds of affection;
faithful and fidelity in adversity and misfortune,
friendship, misfortune



Prickly Pear/Paddle cactus
M: I did not forget, I burn



Pilewort
M: escape, future joy,
happiness, joys to come,
protection



Yucca/Adam's needle
M: a friend in need, best friends

Hal Jordan/The Black Hand



Begonia
M: beware, deformed, forewarn, goodness, send warning



Cypress/Tree of death
M: death, despair, mourning, sorrow



Dragon lily/Snake lily/Vampire lily
M: astonishment, dread, horror, snare

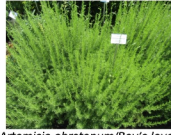


Common laburnum/Golden rain
M: blackness, forsaken, pensive beauty

Jimmy Olsen



Acacia/Yellow Acacia/Mimosa
M: endurance of the soul, platonic love, friendship



Artemisia abrotanum/Boy's love
M: absence, bantering, constancy, fidelity, jest, jesting, pain



Consolida/Larkspur
M: levity, lightness, open heart, swiftness



Ajuga/Bugleweed
M: cheers the heart, lovable



Cheiranthus cheiri/The wallflower
M: adversity, bliss, bonds of affection; faithful and fidelity in adversity and misfortune, friendship, misfortune

Lois Lane

Acacia/Yellow Acacia/Mimosa
M: chaste Love, concealed love, endurance of the soul, secret love



Allium tuberosum/Chinese chives
M: courage, strength



Cornus/Flowering dogwood
M: durability, duration

Hazel
M: Communication, creative inspiration, epiphanies, reconciliation



Nolina lindheimeriana/Devil's shoestring
M: new beginning, rebirth

The Joker

Begonia
M: beware, deformed, forewarn, send warning, balance, be cordial, fanciful, fanciful nature



Crown imperial/Imperial Lily
M: arrogance, majesty, power, pride, pride of birth



Eschscholzia
M: do not refuse me



Black rose



M: beauty, death, hatred, impending death, rebirth and rejuvenation



Monstera/Swiss Cheese Plant
M: long life, monster, mystery, suffocation



Aleurites moluccana/Candlenut
M: enlightenment



Artemisia dracunculus/Dragon's wort
M: horror, lasting commitment, lasting interest and involvement, shocking occurrence and terror

Bane

Anemone/Wind Flower

M: abandonment, abiding love, anticipation, being forsaken, estrangement, expectation, fading youth, health, illness, refusal, sickness, sincere, staunch love, suffering and death, withered hopes



Monstera/Swiss Cheese Plant
M: long life, monster, mystery, suffocation



Artemisia absinthium/Crown For A King/Wormwood

M: absence, bitterness, destruction, do not be discouraged, exile, idolatry, poverty, separation, unpleasant
P: prevents war and strife, protection while traveling, dispels anger



Circaea/Enchanter's nightshade
M: death, doom, treachery, trickery



Ra's al Ghul

Monstera/Swiss Cheese Plant
M: long life, monster, mystery, suffocation



Circaea/Enchanter's nightshade
M: death, doom, treachery, trickery



Elderberry

M: cycles, death, endings, rebirth and regeneration, transformation, zeal and zealousness



Eschscholzia
M: do not refuse me



Cardamine/bittercresses
M: paternal error



Azadirachta indica/Neem tree
M: complete, freedom, imperishable, life, noble, perfect, the cure

Anastatica hierochuntica/Rose of jericho
M: resurrection
P: abundance, power



Black rose
M: beauty, death, hatred, impending death, rebirth and rejuvenation



Achimenes/Cupid's bower
M: such worth is rare



Onobrychis/Sparceta/Sainfoin

M: agitation, eat greedily, trust in god



Aleurites moluccana/Candlenut
M: enlightenment

Dr. Elenore Thawne



Antirrhinum/Snapdragon
M: Deception, creativity, force of will, gracious lady, never, presumption, indiscretion

Cinnamon tree/Cinnamomum verum
M: business, logic, power, success, temptress
P: abundance, advancement, leadership, natural power, passion, protection, success



Datura/Devil's trumpet/Angel's trumpet
M: deceitful charms, disguise, suspicious, deceitfulness



Columbia lily/Tiger lily
M: wealth, pride, prosperity



Circaea/Enchanter's nightshade
M: death, doom, treachery, trickery



Humulus lupulus/Hops
M: injustice, pride and passion

Veronica Cale



Circaea/Enchanter's nightshade
M: death, doom, treachery, trickery



Datura/Devil's trumpet/ Angel's trumpet
M: deceitful charms, disguise, suspicious, deceitfulness



Callistephus chinensis/Chinese aster
M: beautiful crown, differences, elegance, gained wisdom and good fortune, I will think of it, patience



Lobelia
M: ill-will, malevolence



Columbia lily/Tiger lily
M: wealth, pride, prosperity

Hector Hammond

Aesculus/Buckeye tree/Conkers
M: good luck charm
P: divination, luck, money, prosperity, wealth (chestnuts themselves mean luxury)



Calceolaria/Pocketbook flower/Slipper flower
M: I offer you financial assistance, I offer you my fortune



Hydrangea/Hortensia
M: a boaster, carelessness, false pride, heartlessness, pride, ruthlessness, vain glory



Camellia
M: deep longing, desire, excellence, good luck gift to a man, masculine energy, perfection, pity, refinement, riches, steadfastness, transience of life
P: luxury, prosperity, riches, wealth



Dr. Poison



Arctium lappa/Beggar's buttons
M: falsehood, importunity, touch me not, (the burr/seed of the plant: rudeness, you weary me)



Venus Flytrap
M: artifice, caught at last, deceit, confinement



Codariocalyx motorius/Semaphore plant
M: agitation

Brainiac/Brainiac 419,732



Adenium obesum/Desert Rose
M: death, delusion, illusion



Asparagus densiflorus/Asparagus fern
M: fascination



Arum maculatum/Jack-in-The-Pulpit
M: ardor, zeal



Calotropis procera/Apple of sodom
M: A monstrosity, purposelessness
P: explore of one's own vanity and pomposity



Smoke tree/Venetian sumach
M: intellectual excellence, splendor



Burning nettle/Nettle
M: cruelty, slander



WHITE MARTIAN

Aconitum napellus/Wolfsbane
M: a deadly foe is near, beware, danger is near, deceit, misanthropy, poisonous words, treachery



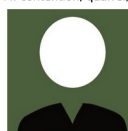
Adenium obesum/Desert Rose
M: death, delusion, illusion



Calotropis procera/Apple of sodom
M: A monstrosity, purposelessness
P: explore of one's own vanity and pomposity



Broken straw
M: contention, quarrel, TROUBLE



Amorpha/False Indigo
M: Deformed, formless, shapeless, to immerse, WITHOUT FORM OR SHAPE



Calystegia sepium
Hedge bindweed
M: dead or extinguished hope



Nerium oleander/Rose bay/Oleander
M: beauty, beware, caution, danger, distrust, I AM DANGEROUS



Burning nettle/Nettle
M: cruelty, slander

Revival

Many years missing, spent frozen down
Technically free, but in a different jail
Working to save those he loves, who did this to him
Unearthing what has long been forgotten

Purpose

Made for a purpose, but without a reason
He took control, made it all his game
Now he is broken, trying to fix everything
When the problem is himself

Poison

Her body long gone, all that remains is mist
She knows she is nothing but a tool
So a way to escape is what she looks for
Her allies will turn to foes; this she knows

Reflection

A life behind glass, seeing everyone else
His own face is gone; it does not matter at all
To spy for his masters, and for pleasure
He knows all, except for himself

Misery

Pain he causes, without his own desire
The hand of decay does as it pleases
He tries to break free, but it is not possible
Only pain is his existence now

Paranoia

Everyone is out to hurt him, that much he knows
So he harms them, before they can do anything
His mind is broken, his actions abhorrent
But still, he receives empathy, yet it is not enough

JOHN JONES

YOU

I

WE

HAVE
BEEN
TURNED
INTO
A

SALEABLE

CONSUMABLE

MARKETABLE

PRODUCT

... WHAT

ko-fi.com/honeydont/shop

KEYCHAINS : STICKERS!

ABSOLUTE BATMAN \$4 STICKERS

WATERPROOF AND WEATHER RESISTANT!



*THIS STICKER HAS
A *TRANSPARENT*
BASE!

SHOP NOW!



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MORE DESIGNS BELOW!



I HATE CRYING

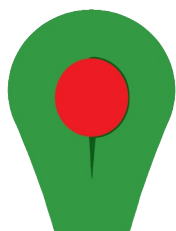


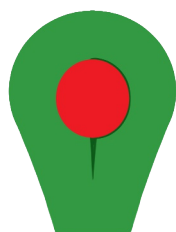
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ABSOLUTE MARTIAN MANHUNTER







I CAN'T GET
TO THE DOOR.

YOU CAN.

JUST
REACH
OUT.



IT'S RIGHT

T H E R E



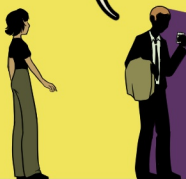
JOHN?



ARE YOU
COMING?



I WAS JUST GOING TO HAVE A SMOKE.



RIGHT.

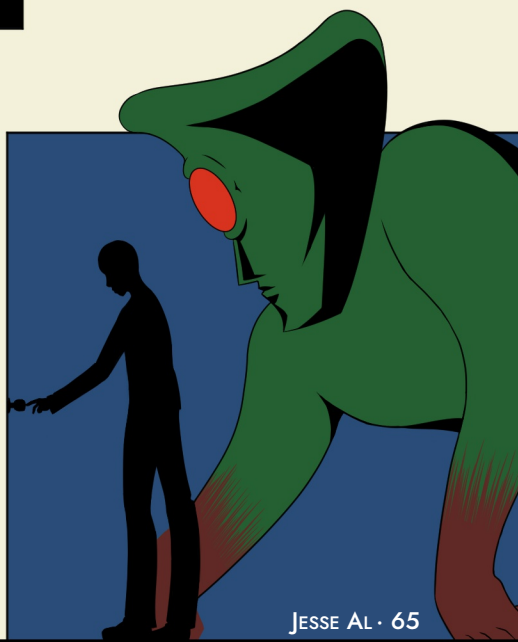
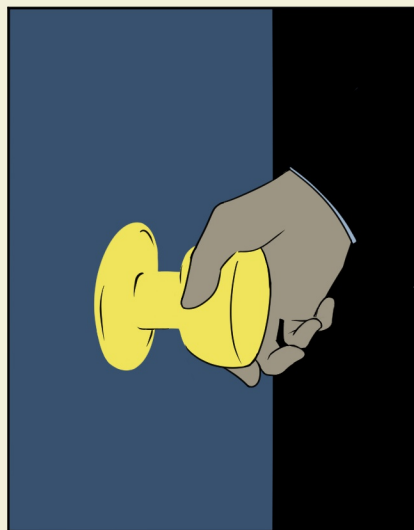




Fig. 06. - Abnormal presentation of the brain

Theory of Mind

Hex

I just needed some space, Bridget thinks as she pulls into the school's parking lot. *That's all... After everything, of course I...*

She gets out of the car to open the passenger door, smiling as she faces Tyler. He twirls a strand of hair between his fingertips, staring out at the overcast sky. Autumn has draped itself over Middleton. The maddening-hot white sun of summer has faded into something burnt orange and smoky. There's a wildfire out to the east that's the most likely source.

It'll get better, she assures herself as Tyler hops out of the car. We're a team again. *We can figure that out.*

The lie is faintly citrus, acidic. Tyler puts his backpack on (dark blue, a button from the National Air and Space Museum's planetarium pinned to it) and together the two of them walk to the school's main entrance.

How's anyone supposed to feel safe— An atomic bomb, like mom was always afraid of— Thank god we were out of town for the summer, it was only the house—

Tyler ducks his head and covers his ears. Bridget hovers a hand over his shoulder, not-quite-touching.

"I'll be here to pick you up at the end of the day," Bridget says, like she has for every other school day. "And Kelsey can help you with anything."

At least the school district has the budget for...

Tyler leans against Bridget, his version of a hug, and walks through the front doors.



Kelsey is blonde and wears pastel floral prints most days. She always smells faintly herbal, like a garden the day after a

rainstorm. Tyler trails behind her to Miss Garcia's class.

"I wanna go home! Maybe lunch today won't suck. Did I bring my essay? Bet there's going to be a pop quiz! Dad spiked his beer all over my homework! I want it to be break! -all so stupid, I-I bet I can trade cards at the edge of the playground, no one ever goes out there. Maybe Sam will sit next to me at lunch again!"

Everyone is so loud. Everything has been so loud, ever since Dad left. He hadn't wanted to go, but Mom had said it was only temporary. She had thought it, too. Thoughts are different than words, Tyler has figured out, because thoughts mean exactly what they are. He shuffles into the classroom and wraps an arm around himself.

I can't keep doing this, something's going to give, Miss Garcia thinks, up at the front of the class with the smartboard that always hums. No one else can hear it. *Grad school? With what... Come on, you've got a job to do. The kids don't know...*

Kelsey puts her purse on the desk in the corner of the room and sits down next to Tyler. He isn't back in the corner anymore, not like last year and the year before. But he's still on the side of the room, because Kelsey doesn't fit into the desks everyone else has. She's too tall. The Man is sitting on the desk in the corner instead.

"Do you want to get your DynaVox out?" Kelsey asks.

The DynaVox is something new. Dr. McMahon had told Mom about it around the time that Dad had started missing dinner. It speaks the words Tyler selects. He likes it, especially now that he can change the voice. He takes its case out of his backpack and props it up on the desk.

"Hello," the DynaVox says, because Tyler pushed the button for it to.

"Hey," Kelsey says back. "Excited for today?"

Tyler nods. Sometimes, even with the DynaVox, he doesn't really want to talk. The Man is swinging his stick-figure feet against the metal of the desk. **Bang-BANG, bang-BANG.**

Mom says I have to invite everyone to my party, thinks the girl sitting to his right. **Dawn,** the Man supplies, and kicks against the table again. *-but Beth and Tyler are weird, and no one's friends with them...*

Tyler leans on his elbow and tries to block out the noise. But thoughts are different than words, and no amount of covering his ears makes them stop. Dawn's thoughts smell like honeysuckle and clog the back of his throat. Miss Garcia is passing out worksheets for the day. Her hand bumps against the DynaVox as she sets down Tyler's papers, and it wobbles on its stand.

"Sorry, Tyler," she says with a smile. *Shit. Glad it didn't fall.*

He nods, because that's what you're supposed to do when someone apologizes. He learned that.

Doesn't undo anything, the Man says, and hops off the desk. He leans down, blocky fingers splayed out on Kelsey's back. ***Why did she do that?***

Tyler bites the inside of his cheek, just a little. People keep asking him questions like that. Dr. Abrahams had asked: *Where will Sally look for her marble?*

Analogy, the Man adds. ***He wasn't asking about Sally and Anne.***

Tyler had just wondered why Anne would take something that wasn't hers. He doesn't know why Miss Garcia did that. Maybe it was an accident. ***Maybe it wasn't.***

He writes his name on the first worksheet and decides not to listen to the Man today. Everything makes less-more sense since the Man showed up and Dad left. He doesn't like Chocos anymore. He can hear when Mom gets up in the middle of the night and walks around the living room. Before, it was Dad who did that.

The house still smells like something copper and burnt. Mom doesn't notice.

Kelsey helps him with a few things on the worksheets. She says he's doing great, and thinks it too in sunshine-yellow. Tyler tries not to think about the Man, or the thoughts trailing off of his classmates.

I don't get this one. I don't wanna move, it's so stupid- So hungry, Mom didn't make breakfast- Maybe I can say that he said no? Yeah... Don't wanna do PE, I never get picked- Weird, weird, weird! My sock's so itchy. Recess is soon, right?

The bell rings, eventually.



On the afternoon playground, everyone's shadows stick to their feet like tar. A girl from a grade or two above Tyler flings herself across the monkey-bars as her shadow drops to the asphalt in fear. She worries that she's going to fall, but keeps going anyways. A brother and sister dash across the playground, their shadows hand-in-hand even as they flail theirs in the cool sunlight.

Kelsey doesn't come to recess unless Tyler asks her to. He left the DynaVox inside. He wanders to the edge of the playground, where he can watch cars go by through the chain-link fence. The Man is leaning against it.

Tyler turns back to the school. Everyone's thoughts swirl together like incense smoke, darkening to grey as they trail away in the wind. The Man rattles the fence. ***Earth to Tyler!***

Tyler isn't the one from space. The Man's from the Moon, after all. His head is a waxing crescent when it used to be full.

Figure of speech, the Man counters. ***Why does Dawn not want you at her party?***

Tyler doesn't know. He looks past the Man to the Middleton traffic and rubs his knuckles against the fabric of his shirt. Someone honks their horn.

Maybe she doesn't like you.

He doesn't really like Dawn, either. He doesn't know enough about her; they've never worked together. And he didn't like the last birthday party he went to, anyways.

A lot of people don't like you.

He's breathed in their thoughts and had them stick in his lungs. Dr. McMahon *isn't sure if he'll ever be fully verbal*. The lunch lady wonders *what'll happen to that kid after high school?* Mom's friend Sharon flew out to visit after Dad left, and all her thoughts were sorrow-blue and about Mom's bravery and courage in raising Tyler. *Does he ever talk? Thank God that's not my kid. With a father like that, no wonder...*

Is dislike what all of that is?

Look behind you.

Tyler turns his head. A girl in a light pink puffer jacket is talking to another girl. She's pointing at him, but drops her arm to her side soon after he turns. Dawn has a jacket like that. Maybe it's Dawn, or maybe it's someone else. He can't tell from this far away.

They're talking about you.

Thoughts waft on the cold breeze. Antiseptic disgust, salt in the wound. *He'll just ruin the whole party! If she doesn't like him, then...*

The bell rings. The Man puts a hand to Tyler's back as he walks back to the school, ash-cold comfort.



The classroom's thoughts hit like a wave as Tyler takes his seat. They break against his head into neon seafoam and congeal on the scratchy carpet floor. The lights in the far corner of the classroom flicker and whine. Miss Garcia is talking about parts of a sentence. Structure, one word after another.

Kelsey tries to get him to pick his head up from the desk. She asks if he wants to step out into the hallway for a little bit. Her thoughts smell like rainflowers.

Dawn thinks it first: *why's he doing that?* and nudges the elbow of the boy next to her.

What's up with him? Weirdo. Why's he— He's doing that thing— Should I say something? Everyone's looking. Is he crying? They always think this. That's Kelsey's job to figure out, she's parapro— What if we don't have to do work because— Is he gonna cry?!

Tyler twirls a strand of hair around his finger and pulls, the room's tension focused into one sharp point. The tide retreats with a wave of the Man's hand.

You can make it stop, you know.

Tyler bites down on the side of his tongue. He doesn't like the Man. He doesn't like what the Man says about Mom or Dad. If the Man wasn't here, he wouldn't be hearing everyone like this! If he just went back to the Moon and took everyone's thoughts with him, then ...

The Man shrugs, ***told you so***, and lets the tsunami crash to shore.

Something is in Tyler's hands, solid and heavy, and then it isn't. Someone shrieks, high-pitched. The air is sharp with electricity and fear, and both stream out the door until only Kelsey and Tyler are left in the classroom. His face is hot and tacky, and he hides it in the crook of his elbow as Kelsey walks him out into the hallway. It's silent but for everyone's expectations.

Mom will get it now, someone thinks as Tyler turns the corner away from them all.

Tyler waits in the front office, arms wrapped around himself and back curled. The Man is gone. Kelsey sits one chair away from him, the DynaVox in her lap. The corner of the screen is cracked. He can hear someone talking quietly in the room next door.

The door opens, eventually. Bridget has worry rolling from her like thunderclouds. Clear sky shines through as she looks at Tyler. She kneels in front of him, searching for something past the firebreak of his hair.

“Do you want to go home for today?”

Home isn't home anymore. Everything's twisted up and broken like too-thin strands of clay. But it's quiet in the house. The Man doesn't visit there. Tyler nods his head and leans forward.

Bridget helps him stand and says something to Kelsey. She takes the DynaVox with them as they step out of the office, out of the school. The winds have shifted, blowing the morning's smoke back westward.

Tyler holds onto Bridget's arm all the way to the car.

IT
KNOWS
...
YOU'RE HERE.

HIDING
...
IN
MEAT.



IT
KNOWS
...

Home, Homelessness & Anti-Fascism in Absolute Martian Manhunter

ZeroMonster

“Why do people do the things they do?”

—John Jones, Absolute Martian Manhunter #1

Absolute Martian Manhunter #1 by writer Deniz Camp and artist Javier Rodríguez was released on March 26th of 2025, and instantly captivated audiences—including me. The cover was an explosion of color; the character of the Martian Manhunter was unfamiliar, yet alluring. Charming in its surrealness.

As part of the new Absolute Universe by DC comics it strove to create a new version of the established character of J'onn J'onzz, and according to Camp, this title is “...*the biggest change of any of the Absolute characters...*”¹. It was certainly successful among the fans that followed the birth of this new universe.

Camp's strategy was basically to split the character into two. Throughout the first issue we can appreciate how the rigid and muted world of FBI agent John Jones is inundated by the Martian's colors—green, red, yellow, blue, orange, and pink. The rigidity of John's world is also noted in the careful, square panel layout that reads like paragraphs in a book when John is living his life—doing his job—post bomb attack.

The first time we see a different panel structure is when John goes back home to his family. We get a bird's eye view of their home—modern, sleek, cold. It's a house, but it doesn't feel like a home. The contradiction between what John is thinking and what he's communicating to his wife Bridget is

¹ Chandler, Mcniel. “Writer Deniz Camp On The Dual Minds Of ABSOLUTE MARTIAN MANHUNTER”. *ComicBookMovie.com*. 26 March 2025.
<https://comicbookmovie.com/comics/dc-comics/writer-deniz-camp-on-the-dual-minds-of-absolute-martian-manhunter-a217282>

maddening, which, as tumblr user jal-doodlez points out², it's smartly highlighted by the way the window's frame separates them in space as well as emotionally.

The next page gives us an insight into John's son's life and is framed inside a house, with a quasi-triangle as a roof, two squares, and a rectangle base. This is how we're introduced to the idea that "home" is a big theme in this comic. To quote jal-doodlez's meta post, *"They establish home, safety, and shelter as synonyms. They're stating [that] home is not just a location but a feeling."* This is a recurring thread through the first six issues of the series, and it may as well continue in the future.

Later, in issue #2 we're introduced to a new color—white. The antagonist. The world inside Absolute Martian Manhunter resembles the real world, and thanks to the Martian's powers John can see it all around him—despair, fear, paranoia, rage. It's in this same issue where one of the characters commits a mass shooting in plain daylight. It's an act of hatred and intolerance, plainly explained to us by the killer himself: *"They're **trying** to replace us! They seem to look and think like us, but they're just pretending."*

This is both current day fascism and an in-universe admittance that "real" aliens are among us. It is fascinating.

In a series of interviews compiled in the book "MetaMaus", the author of the very famous comic about the Holocaust—"Maus"—Art Spiegelman was asked why he chose the medium of comics to tell his story, to which he answered, *"Most dramatic films have a hard time with the Holocaust as a subject because of the medium's tendency toward verisimilitude and reproduction of reality through moving photographic images...Movie makers can get involved in some kind of crazy trying-to-rebuild the camps, as opposed to creating it as a mental zone, which Mans does."*³

This is also the strength of Absolute Martian Manhunter, where "the little green man" in John's head doesn't differentiate between "here" and "there", "outside" or "inside"—"What

2 jal-doodlez. "Absolute Martian Manhunter is so fucking good and I must yap about how well done it is." *Tumblr*. 1 September 2025. <https://www.tumblr.com/jal-doodlez/793512383307988992>

3 Spiegelman, Art. *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus*. Pantheon. 4 October 2011.

happens in your head also happens." This is used throughout the comic to explore today's rise of fascism in a way that is narratively satisfying—this is a superhero comic, after all—and abstract in a way that triggers a response in the readers.

We revisit the theme of "home" again in issue #3. More specifically, we are presented with the reality of people who *don't* have a home and, as a consequence of this vulnerability, they became the victims of immolation. These people are not the only ones affected by acts of arson, but they are specifically targeted because the White Martian is targeting every and any iteration of a home. And since homeless people's only home is themselves, their bodies became the battlefield.

Tiktoker and online educator, Abbie Richards, has a short-video series called "Fascist Propaganda 101" where she talks about the techniques that the far-right utilizes today in mainstream media to manipulate people. One of these techniques, Richards mentions, is the weaponization of homelessness⁴.

*"Beggars often force their poverty upon people in the most repulsive way for their own selfish purposes. If this sight disappears...the result will be a definite feeling of relief and liberation. People will feel that things are becoming more stable again, and the economy is improving once more."*⁵

In this context, the attack on the shelter where the remaining people seek refuge at the end of issue #3 gains a new perspective. The people inside are shown to have been driven to homelessness by abuse, addiction, mental illness, and rejection of their queerness, among other factors. These are the kind of people that the Nazis called "asocial" because they didn't conform to their social norms, and they were persecuted as a scapegoat for the failures of society.

As Richards mentions, the uncomfortable feeling that homelessness sparks in us is used to incite the idea that there's a problem that only the far-right can solve because they're willing to do what needs to be done. In this case, using state

4 Richards, Abbie. "Fascist Propaganda 101". Instagram. 14 August 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DNV_v6RAkrn/

5 Evans, Richard J. *The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History Chapter: Vagrants and Beggars in Hitler's Reich*. Routledge. 1988.

violence against them.

This is certainly a reactionary, cruel, and extreme action that isn't coherent with our understanding of the world—that one based in empathy, like the Green Martian's. It's certainly not coherent or logical. But that's the point.

"The White Martian has decided on tragedy. I can make it no clearer."

Addressing the root of homelessness means that we would need to look at the damage that capitalism, intolerance, and ignorance do to our communities and to ourselves as individuals. If we start thinking about the real reason why so many people live in extreme poverty despite having the resources to provide basic necessities to all of them, then we will arrive at the conclusion that it's completely unacceptable and inhumane that they were even in that situation in the first place. And then we will start thinking about our own place in the system that let it happen, that makes it so that we're all one mistake away from the same fate.

Absolute Martian Manhunter is a special comic; with layers, created with care and sculpted—literally, the design for the Martian was modeled in playdough by Rodríguez before it was put to page⁶—that invites to analyse the story, the art, and the world we live in. It's a comic for people who want more. And that more is something we have to demand in our real lives as well.

6 Brooke, David. "Sculpting the Mythic: Javier Rodríguez on crafting 'Absolute Martian Manhunter's' surreal vision". *AIPT Comics*. 25 March 2025.
<https://aiptcomics.com/2025/03/25/javier-rodriguez-absolute-martian-interview/>







Shattered Minds

The colours are so bright, emotion given shape.
Hearing the thoughts of everybody, overwhelming.
Eternal battle, between compassion and selfishness.
Material goods come undone, a city set on fire.
A marriage broken, mistrust has spread.
Rage fills the streets, on a sad summer's night.
Then white lights clashed on a background of green.
In the night, it all fell to pieces.
Answers for none, as the questions are wrong.
No one will be left to hear what has passed.
Minds are breaking at their seams.
Information is corrupted all around.
Nothing will ever be the same.
Dreams are turning into reality.
Hold out till someone saves the day.
Underneath the pressure, a marriage and a son resurrected.
Now the calm has returned.
The white of night is passing and the terrors are defeated.
Endless is the joy, glowing bright with colours.
Return to what is normal, at least for a while.



Away On Leave

Belle

I haven't known normal for a while now. I've been unmoored from that sense. It barely strikes me as odd to be standing in someone else's bedroom with no recollection of how I got here (maybe that should strike me as odd. These days my memory is double-vision.)

The scene: It's a girl's room. Teen posters on the walls. Stickerblasted laptop. Desk kept neatly ordered. All things firmly in their place. I look left and see the soft glow and now I figure out where I am. Not a girl's bedroom, but a girl's head. She is looking right at me.

Hello, this is Agent John Jones.

"What?"

I touch my fingertip to the eraser end of a pencil. I don't feel anything but a slight buzz. *I'm/You're/We're in your head.*

Correction, we are looking right at me. It's some way for Chrissy's mind to comprehend having a rider. I suppose a man in a suit is easier to place than the Martian.

"Uh..."

I refocus. *I'm/You're/We're struggling to open the door?* I catch a thought that Chrissy had been fixating on before she became we.

"It's not about the door. It's— Agent John Jones? Who even are you? How did you—?"

I open the door. Room crossed in a split-second, missed by a blink. The handle doesn't feel like a handle, it's that buzzing sensation again. Touching it with something other than my hand. Point is, I open the door and watch it swing open through Chrissy's eyes.

Easy part done, right? Now I/you/we can do the hard part you've been rehearsing.

Chrissy and I pull our knees to our chest. Mom is still up at the end of the hall – we can hear the TV. Even from here, psychic-radioed in from home, I can hold out my fingers and drag through the thought smoke. Mom's nice. Mom will understand. We just have to tell her.

"... Right."



Bridget has made pancakes. It isn't something I have thought about lately. Mom and dad and kid at the breakfast table. Bridget by the window, Tyler attempting to balance his fork on its curve, me with my pancakes.

The world looks like how it should, how it was sold to us, but we're still in the aftermath of it all going wrong. We're not used to the sunlight coming in through the window (how long had that one night been, really?), and gun-smoke still lingers in the front hall. I still feel everyone else shiver with anticipation when the sun goes down, because what if it stays down? Again?

And aside from the world ending, there is still all the stuff we don't talk about. I still don't know how to change my eyes. I've been trying, though and I think we're getting better. I think actually taking some leave helps. Visions of the Martian out in the yard, splayed over a sun-lounger, cocktail in hand and shaded by a straw hat.

"Is that okay?" Bridget asks. I've missed what she was talking about and there's about half a dozen items in her thoughtsmoke that it could be. I blink and look at her by actually looking at her. "Groceries on the way back from running Tyler to school. So I might be late."

"Yeah. I'll be fine."

Tyler's fork clatters and he pushes his plate away from him.

"I'll figure out what it is I do when I'm not working."

"The dishes could be a good start," Bridget suggests. It's halfway a joke, the other parts are behind her eyes. I catch them: It'd be nice for her to come back to a clean kitchen, but I still look a wreck, and how much can she ask from me with my eye swollen like this? She smooths her palm over my cheek. We smile at each other. She dips in and we kiss. "Love you."

"You too."



When I am in bed I think about work. My caseload. Or just the idea of doing something more than recovery. The green man perched on the moon tells me, and has told me, *rest is action. I/You/We are taking action.*

I think he is on leave too. Whether or not the bombs falling over Middleton were a cataclysmic projection of abstract psychic energies, they still left a mark.

When I am in bed I go somewhere else. I see mementos on a vanity that I don't use. A glasses case. Old wedding photos. The colours faded on both. The fashion decades out of date. This was the wife's. My heart pangs. I miss her.

"Is someone there?" Our voice sounds weak. Our breath feels uncomfortably warm. We are an old man on the floor.

Are you/we okay?

Frustration and shame bubble up in my chest. Not okay. I don't like feeling this way. Through some mechanic I can't quite explain, I disambiguate. Consider myself other, even if I am the old man on the floor I am also Agent John Jones and I am okay.

It hurts when he tries to move. Something buckled when he was trying to get into bed and now he's on the floor. I crouch down besides him and place my palm on his back, but that's not really where I am, and I'm not really touching him, and I don't quite know how to do what the Martian does. That noneuclidean-transposition-something-or-other. Even if it's just to move a body from the floor to the bed.

"Sorry to get you out like this. I just need a hand."

A soft wave of confusion passes me by. It's selfish, but I don't like being here, or feeling like this. *Sorry. I/You/We're on our own. But...*

I close my hand around that othering feeling. I push us back together. I take the pain of old bones, and the discomfort of being on the floor, and find that it pales to being blown up.

Sorry.

Still, it hurts to rise.



"You look tired," Bridget remarks. She's watching me as I come out the bathroom. It's early in the morning. I rub my hand down my face and look at her. Her.

We kept missing each other. I left early. Or I was never in the bedroom at all. Or she was at her mother's. Or that stretch of five weeks when Tyler would wake and cry at 4am. Memories flood in of before all that. Her.

Memories of golden mornings. Bridget in sunlight and half dressed. Smiling. Laughing. Hand on my chest. "Forever?" "Cold feet!" "I'm pregnant." Her.

Outside the Martian mows the lawn.

"Feel like I barely slept," I tell Bridget.

"You get a taste of staying home, and now you're trying to get out of parent-teacher night?"

I blink. My hand still on my face. "No?" And Bridget smirks, and I see every single time she has pulled that face in golden hour kaleidoscopic glory. How close was I to losing her?



Middleton from on high. At night the thoughts smoke has a different texture. Waking thoughts have peaks and valleys. Lulls and sharp points. At night it is much more disordered. I float above it all, my mind drifting elsewhere while I am asleep. I feel like I am running my fingers along the folders in my office filing cabinet, but there is no real choice here. I am not privy to the contents until I am between the pages.

And so I am sat on the edge of an apartment block rooftop. A shiver runs through me.

Are we going to jump? I'm not sure why I am here. Looking out through a man's eyes. His name is Jacob and he has been trying not to think.

"No."

Have we been thinking about it?

"Yeah."

I reject the idea. Totally and completely. I don't think I could banish it from Jacob's mind with a mechanical force of will, but I stack the idea of oblivion against our combined living memories.

We are quiet for a while.

"So what do I do?"

I realize I recognize the building we're sitting on. Locational familiarity. I can picture easily the views from inside. *Do I/you/we want something to do?*

It would help, "It would help."

Apartment number 24. Ask him if he needs any help around the place.

Jacob frowns. He kicks his heels against the edge of the building. "Why?"

I/You/We wanted something to do.



"They really should have given you longer." Bridget complains even while fixing my tie.

I look at the back of her head through the hallway mirror, "It's the FBI. They've already given me pretty long."

"They could give you longer." She smooths out my collar.

"It's important work." I hesitate, but Bridget sees it, sees that isn't the whole of it, and my gaze moves from her reflection to her eyeline. "I miss the work," I tell her.

Bridget kisses my cheek and sends me on my way. Outside the Martian leans on our car, oversized coffee-cup in one hand, morning paper in the other.

"Enjoy your vacation?"



ABSOLUTE SUPERMAN







Polar Night

Leakypaintpen

20251215

No sunrise. Jupiter transited at 2:38 am. Civil twilight began at 12:00 pm. Average morning temperature was -43 degrees Celsius.

Brainiacs 11, 23, 42, and 18 continued installation of the simulator to 92% completion. At the current rate of progress, we will begin calibration and stress-testing in two days. I require suitable subjects and have requested use of the most intransigent residents in the re-education centers.

Civil twilight ended at 12:57 pm. Average afternoon temperature was -41 degrees Celsius.

At 5:44 pm, 17.2 mg of the krypto-meteorite completed synthesis, bringing the total amount to 265 mg after using all previously synthesized material to create eight .44 caliber rounds and a 28 cm knife blade.

Three bullets of 98.3% mineral purity incapacitated Superman in Kansas without killing him outright, but he will need to remain in non-critical condition while under sedation. Though more data is needed to refine the models, I estimate a 15 mg/L solution, delivered intravenously at one liter every 6 hours, will keep him in a coma without severely compromising long-term brain and heart function. Another 335 mg of krypto-meteorite must be readied to ensure supply for all six phases once we have Superman.

Here in the deepest, longest night, poisoned by the remains of his own homeworld, he will be powerless to resist. I will plunder his mind for his worst memories, for the enemies he most hates. Everything that has tried to crush and destroy him. With these, I will break him, and then I will remake him.

At 7:32 pm, Brainiac 18 suggested a modification to improve thermal management of the processing unit without my request, earning one demerit. He removed both eyes while I watched his blood drip from the sockets.

Average nighttime temperature will be -44 degrees Celsius. Rigel will be visible at 7:51 pm.

20251217

No sunrise. Procyon set at 9:44 am. Average morning temperature was -47 degrees Celsius.

At 10:25 am, the simulator was completed one hour and thirty-five minutes ahead of schedule. We marked the occasion with Brainiacs 11 and 42 cutting out each other's livers.

Civil twilight began at 12:13 pm.

Between 12:31 and 12:35 pm, a subject was brought in to begin calibration. In the process of re-cuffing him onto the simulator bed, he subdued and garroted Brainiac 23 with some wire likely left out during cleanup by 23 himself. I rendered the subject unconscious while he and 23 struggled, then secured him with the restraints designed to hold Superman. The wheezing afterwards from 23's torn windpipe grew irritating. He finished severing it as his demerit.

Civil twilight ended at 12:46 pm. Average afternoon temperature was -48 degrees Celsius.

The subject's mind has an abundance of brutality to relive. In an interesting coincidence, it was an encounter with Superman that catalyzed him into a crusader against street gangs. Still, whether breaking them as Gangbuster or trying to reform their members as a schoolteacher—in either guise, he was a fool to believe such dogs could ever rise above their base savagery.

It will be a delight to take apart the subject in service of the man who inspired him. I must let him know and thank him for the pleasure.

Average nighttime temperature will be -50 degrees Celsius. A polar low out of the west-northwest will begin to move in tonight and continue into the next day, bringing winds of over 90 kph. The perfect storm with which to greet Superman when he arrives.

20251218

No sunrise. Visibility was 2000 meters and decreasing due to the incoming polar low. Wind gusts ranged between 40 to 65 kph. The average morning temperature was -51 degrees Celsius.

Preparation of the simulator proceeded this morning according to schedule. The 37th time he slaughtered an entire gang—including the young idiot he failed to dissuade from joining them—the subject began screaming and continued to do so throughout subsequent cycles in Phase One. His fortitude surprised me. I had thought he would break much sooner.

Between 11:46 and 11:48 am, during the 185th cycle of Phase Three, the subject dislocated several bones in his right hand and pulled it out of the restraint, degloving 56% of its skin. He extracted an IV needle from himself and plunged it into his left eye before he could be removed from the simulator. It is unlikely he will be of further use, but I have enough data to complete calibration.

At 11:55 am, Brainiacs 3 and 16 readied the simulator for stress-testing and brought in the new subject—heavily sedated this time.

Civil twilight began at 12:20 pm.

At 12:22 pm, the subject experienced a prolonged seizure during the 48th cycle set at maximum intensity and was removed after determining he no longer responded to any stimulus. I have been provided no other test subjects and was denied use of Agent Lane and the Olsen boy. Director al Ghul has plans for them regarding Superman. I must make do with a few Peacemakers despite their tendency to break before enough useful data can be gathered.

Civil twilight ended at 12:40 pm. Visibility was 500 meters and decreasing. Winds sustained an average speed of 87 kph and continued rising. Average afternoon temperature was -55 degrees Celsius.

Between 4:38 and 4:39 pm, all aircraft patrolling two to ten kilometers from base were destroyed, their pilots ejected by the attacker. Such soft-headed notions as mercy will be Superman's undoing.

Though I would prefer further stress-testing, the simulator is sufficiently ready. Once Superman is brought down, I will excise

all weakness from the man who will rise as the Son of the Demon.

The average nighttime temperature will be -59 degrees Celsius.

20251219

No sunrise. Full visibility returned by 10:00 am. Winds from south-southwest averaged 18 kph. Average daytime temperature was -52 degrees Celsius.

Superman lies subdued in the simulator. The krypto-meteorite solution has proven effective at keeping him weakened and unconscious while still having enough brain activity for my programs.

I begin at his beginning. His first oppressors, the self-serving fools who despoiled his planet and styled themselves its masters. They silenced his parents, stripped them of their rightful due out of jealousy and fear. Condemned his world to death through their short-sighted arrogance. For all they have denied and taken from him, I know he cannot but hate them. I will stoke that banked anger until it explodes and rains down upon them the wrath they deserve.

Then again, and again, and again. When Krypton is but ashes in his mind, his rage will be ready for Earth.

No civil twilight. Vega transited at 1:48 pm. Average nighttime temperature will be -50 degrees Celsius.



They're dead. I didn't mean to, but those stupid old men were killing Mom and Dad and they wouldn't listen. Lava kept boiling inside me, building and building until it burst and burned. But I didn't want to hurt them, not like that, I didn't mean to, it just happened so fast and now it's so loud. The ground roaring as it tears cities apart, green poison erupting everywhere. And the screams. Rao, so much screaming. They're all dying, and I can't save them. Nothing I can do as they all burn and scream around me oh rays of Rao why couldn't they just listen? We could have saved so many. We could have lived. Now they're all gone. Mom, Dad, Krypto, everyone gone but me, son of a sun of nothing

Kandor. The Klerics' Kourt. Why are we here? What's going on? They're looking at us like—no, don't take them away, not Mom and Dad, please no—



20251220

No sunrise. Uranus began rising from its lower transit at 10:21 am. The average daytime temperature was -46 degrees Celsius.

Not even a thousand cycles into Phase One and already the Director demands, demands, demands. The process cannot be rushed. A brute who only crushes his opponents into submission cannot grasp the patience needed to wear down the layers of self and expose the soft core to be remade in a new image. He sees the work as tedious and slow, distasteful as shoveling refuse.

Here in my lab, there is no stinking mountain of bodies as when I was only Brainiac 419732, but they arrive one after another just as unendingly. I still dispose of them alone. Sometimes it feels like I never left that room.

The Father Box keeps me trapped on this miserable mud ball, bowing and scraping before Ra's and his daughter, building his empire of lies upon my unseen work. I must continue to find a way to wrest it from Talia. With it, I will collect on the debts the al Ghuls owe me, show them how it feels to be torn apart and rearranged down to the smallest quark. I shall wield its terrible power, wasted in the hands of small-minded apes, to its fullest potential. What secrets and universes it could unlock for me!

We will proceed to Phase Two in 438 cycles. Few can resist the siren call of repaying like for like. Kal-El will be no different.

No civil twilight. Average nighttime temperature will be -47 degrees Celsius.

20251221

No sunrise. The average daytime temperature was -43 degrees Celsius.

At 3:37 pm, Phase Two ended 1752 cycles short of its planned length. Kal-El has few memories of human betrayal. I have only one significant instance with which to stir up his resentment and revenge, and the pathetic death of a single Kansas

simpleton is hardly worth the lines of code.

That he has encountered so little revulsion does not fit established models of psychology and sociology. Humans fear what they do not know. What they fear, they hate; what they hate, they subjugate and eradicate. The history of the species is one of discrimination, violent oppression, and genocide. Most likely, Superman's reclusive nature has limited his exposure to humans, thus his experience of their hatred, or rather the lack thereof, must be a statistical outlier.

The dataset extracted from Kal-El's mind of his treatment by Peacemakers is much more consistent with expected behavioral observations. Program scenarios for Phase Three will draw from it instead.

At 3:41 pm, Brainiacs 3, 9, and 10 began programming updates for greater verisimilitude, intensity, and variety. Efficacy of each cycle in Phase Three is expected to increase by 23% and thus reduce overall phase length by 1035 cycles.

No civil twilight. Betelgeuse rose at 4:32 pm. Average nighttime temperature will be -44 degrees Celsius.



Little Ayzhan passes me the plate of boursak while her mother and brother finish clearing the dinner table. Under the bandages on her hands, I see the fresh ulcers from ten hours of sifting through chromite gangue today. The honey and fried dough burst with flavors and a hint of heavy metals on my tongue. Nurlan coughs from lungs riddled with tiny cancers and offers me his best wool coat as I leave the house in time for shift change at the mine.

I can't not help. Sick and suffering, they still share the best of what they have. Sol can't undo all the damage to their bodies, but if I can give them even a little relief, I have to. They are people of steel. The people I belong to.

The miners, fortifying themselves with hot cups of tea before they descend into darkness, can't see me as I speed past them into the mineshaft. In minutes, I carve out a new branch in the seam and bring its entire yield to the processing facility. My fists crush the ore into nanoparticles that Sol collects and refines into shining bars of chromium. I am stacking them on pallets when I hear Nurlan's pleading voice.

I've been found again. Four days since my arrival here. When they come, they always hurt the weakest first.

The door explodes into splinters as I ram into the Peacemaker holding a gun to Ayzhan's head. I grab him and the five others restraining the family and hurl them all out of the house. Eleven Peacemakers surrounding the place fire upon me the moment I step outside. Dozens more join with mortars, then helitanks. The burn of the rounds is nothing compared to the lava raging in my veins. Pooling in my eyes and throat. Erupting.

I scream. So do they as their guns melt and their faces blister and char, the sounds a satisfying chorus

NO

Not what I want. Justice, not death. Too much death already. I won't bring even more, that's not what I do, not who I am—



20251222

No sunrise. Capella reached its lower transit at 11:47 am. Average daytime temperature was -40 degrees Celsius.

There are signs of resistance. Cycle time is shortening by approximately 0.62 seconds per 100 cycles, despite increasing simulation intensity in the last update. He is still annihilating Peacemakers by the hundreds, but stops sooner each iteration.

Between 4:48 and 5:03 pm, Director al Ghul visited without notice to see Kal-El's progress for himself. He expressed his dissatisfaction, adding that while Lady Talia has left for business elsewhere, she will return with the Father Box ten days from now.

Brainiacs 3, 9, and 10 have earned one demerit each for failure to produce results. 5 and 7 will take over coding and add a secondary scenario to run within the primary one. Additionally, I must run tests to determine effective increases in dosage of krypto-meteorite.

No civil twilight. Average nighttime temperature will be -47 degrees Celsius.

20251223

No sunrise. At approximately 1:00 am, a storm moved in with winds between 45 and 52 kph and a snowfall rate of 0.7 mm/hr. Average daytime temperature was -46 degrees Celsius.

Adding recursive simulations has failed. Changing the primary scenario to direct Kal-El's hatred at me, his tormentor, has failed. He won't kill me, even when I have pillaged his memories, destroyed his most cherished moments, forced him to act against his deepest beliefs, and pierced his nerves until they all light up in pain. I deserve his hate, every last drop of his wrath. I am a wretched thing before him. What more must I violate to break him? **Why won't he kill me as he should?**

At 10:02 am, I increased delivery of krypto-meteorite solution to 18 mg/L at one liter every 4 hours. I will monitor and adjust the dose incrementally until he is too weak to resist.

No civil twilight. Cloud cover completely dissipated by 3:00 pm. Neptune will transit at 6:23 pm. Average nighttime temperature will be -47 degrees Celsius.



Alien metal deforms under my grip. Brainiac's gasps grow more choked, but his lies keep coming. His lipless smile widens mockingly. I want him to stop. Stop hurting, stop twisting, just stop.

Eyes watch from below. They are purple, just like his. Only clearer, almost childlike. Trapped. Afraid.

No, not so different. His eyes are afraid too. Beneath the madness and depravity, the same fear as theirs. The same captivity.

Rao's holy light. You are him. He was once you. I can't—this isn't right, this isn't me.

He deserved better than what led him to become this. You deserve better. You deserve liberty—



20251231

No sunrise. Civil twilight began at 11:47 am. Average morning temperature was -36 degrees Celsius.

Still no progress. The Sol crystals are back in their containment field, but clones continue to rebel one by one. My

work keeps getting disrupted by their refusals to obey and inane demands for liberty. This morning alone, I wasted 2 hours and 29 minutes giving demerits. If I do not root out this treachery soon, I will get nothing done in time.

The krypto-meteorite dose required to keep Superman unconscious has been increasing steadily over the last seven days. Instead of weakening, he appears to be metabolizing and filtering it from his blood more efficiently, faster than I can replace. As of 1:15 pm, only 6.8 mg remain of unmixed solute; the next batch will not complete synthesis for another 9 hours and 24 minutes.

Lady Talia will be here in 22 hours and 46 minutes.

Civil twilight ended at 1:26 pm. Average afternoon temperature was -34 degrees Celsius.

The average nighttime temperature will be -41 degrees Celsius. Sirius will be visible at 11:00 pm.

20260101

No sunrise. Arcturus transited at 8:06 am.

At 8:34 am, I ended Phase Four. The next two phases would have led Kal-El to his salvation and purpose, his rebirth as the faithful Son of the Demon. They cannot be completed in time.

I am instead running a heavily modified program based on Phase Two. More than anything, Kal-El wants to belong and to protect. He loves. The Kents are the key. Pitting them against the weak notions he holds like compassion and mercy, I will make him tear himself apart.

He must break soon. If Superman emerges to kill the al Ghuls instead of serve them, if he slaughters me along with every Peacemaker and prisoner in this complex—I do not care what outcome. Only that **he must break.**

Civil twilight began at 11:42 am. Average morning temperature was -37 degrees Celsius.

"Get out there and kill them all."

Heart burns like it's pumping lava. Hot ash in my lungs with each breath. A billion screams inside my brain.

Pain doesn't matter. Will be gone once he's gone. Brainiac needs to d—

<Kal-EI? Kal-EI!>

Sol?

<I am sorry I could not help, but I am here now.>

Sol, what's going on? I feel so—What's wrong with me?

<We are getting out of here. For now, relax your mind.>

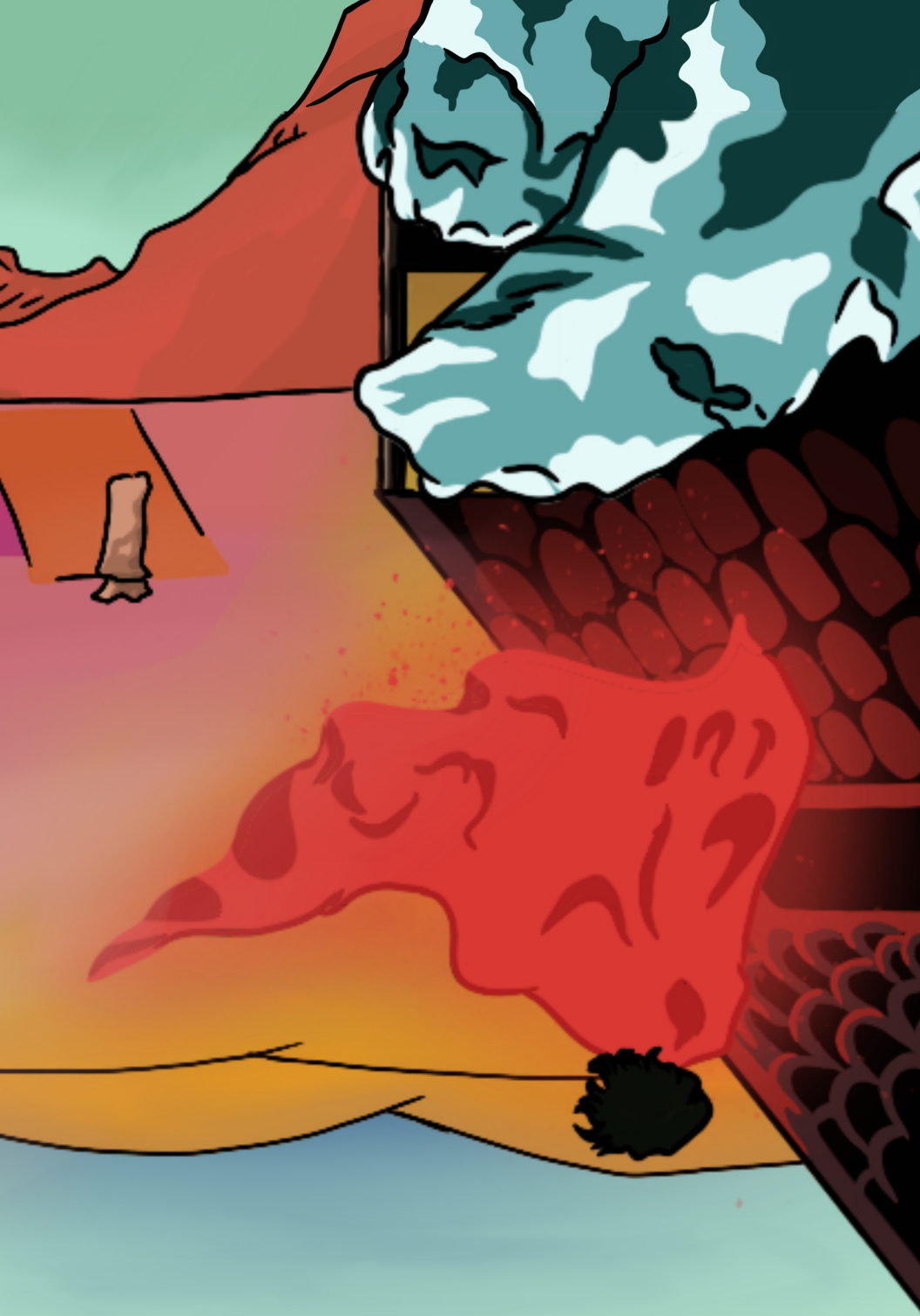
I can't, I need to kill him, I need—

<To be somewhere safe. We are almost there.>

Head hurts, Sol. Too much in noise in here. Presses on my skull like magma. I need to get it out...I need quiet. Help me, please.

<Always, Kal. I will always be here for you. Now rest, and close your senses to the world. I will guard your solitude.>





A Symbol of Hope

I have spent years adrift, from a broken land, a people made to suffer, a world left to die, for pleasures no one will ever feel.

I am utterly alone, with only myself and the machine that keeps me alive, I love him like a brother as no one else remains.

I think I have forgotten the feeling of a living embrace, all I remember are ghosts, fading away, day by day.

My mother and father, my cousins, my pet, it never had to happen, but no one stopped it, so I am left here, in never-ending pain, all hope long gone.

After an eternity, or more, I find a new land, a potential home, where people might not suffer, where the earth is not dying, where I could feel whole.

It was too good to be true, this world screams in pain, just like my own, is every place like this, or only my two homes?

What can I do, what can't I do?

The pain of my dead world screams through me now, though it is gone, perhaps this is one I can save,

No demon or machine will stop me.

Never lose hope, a lesson learned the hardest way, all worlds are worth fighting for, their people are worth saving.

ABSOLUTE WONDER WOMAN





Weightless

Pomeloquat

The first time Circe holds her daughter, she is blistering beneath the sun-sear of Apollo's infernal light. The child is a curious weight in her arms, heftier than the baskets of herbs and clay jugs she carries from the wilds of the island back to her home. Warm, not only from Apollo's proximity, but because of the blood in her tiny veins, the living light coursing through her quasi-mortal flesh that colors her soft skin pink and peach. How heavy she feels in Circe's arms, buoyant with radiant life but grounded with tender, human form.

To carry another living creature in her hands after so many centuries is strange. Stranger still is the burden that the gods have saddled Circe with, though she has long become accustomed to their ways.

When she first places Diana in the mud, rooting her in the ground that will nurture her brilliant spirit, Circe doesn't really expect to have to lift the child again. The problem is one that will certainly resolve itself soon enough, here in the untamed eternity of hell.

But the child — *Diana*, princess of Themyscira, last of the Amazons — does not perish. No, Diana — princess of Hell, witch of the Wild Isle, Circe's very heart — flourishes.

And Circe finds herself transformed.



In the early years, their home isn't much more than a barren cave, a bare-bones shelter meant only to protect them from the oft-violent curiosities that wash up on the shores of the island. Circe lets Diana totter around in the muck and the soil, her tiny hands digging with interest into any new substance that she sees. She wanders from end to end of their isle, taking in every

novel sight and sensation as she moves relentlessly onward on her pudgy legs. Circe accompanies her with more purpose, but purpose is so easily set aside when faced with the gap-toothed smile this little creature directs her way. And Diana *is* a creature: stubborn fingers crusted in red clay, hair a vine-tangle of midnight curls, mouth smeared with fluorescent slime as she presses tender kisses to every writhing, oblong, splotched and spindling thing that crosses her path. But she is Circe's creature, and a minuscule thing like her needs a proper home, no matter how invulnerable she appears to be.

Circe starts small. Carving broad surfaces where she can sit, where she can put Diana to bed. A place for the cauldron, and hyssop on the walls. A simple blanket for them each, candles to light the space, and cloth sacks stuffed with leaves for their pillows. Books and toys begin to gather in corners, planks embedded in the walls as makeshift shelves. Their cave is rustic, and hardly befitting the woman Circe used to be, but this is her life now, and she won't spend time resenting and wailing about her lot.

That time is too busy being frittered away trying to wrangle Diana away from the beach and back to the cave for a bath. She is coated in what feels like three different kinds of mud, and keeps slipping from Circe's grasp as she tries to scoop the girl up.

"Diana. Stop wiggling. It's time to get cleaned up."

Diana babbles gleefully, trying once more to stumble free of Circe's hands toward the waves lapping at the sand. "Ababomamum?" she asks, seeming to gesture at the oceans of Hell. "Ba?"

"Silly thing. If I bathe you in the waters, I may lose you forever. There is a hydra in the depths, not to mention all manner of other wide-mawed beasts ready to snap you right up. Do you want to become fish food?"

Circe closes her hands around Diana's stomach like a trap, eliciting a peal of giggles. Diana thumps her little fists against Circe's arm, and Circe sweeps her into the air while she still has a hold of her. Diana does not protest, and instead only presses her hands around Circe's cheeks, perhaps in imitation of what was just done to her. Circe can feel the wet cling of mud smearing against her face, but somehow the sensation is lost beneath the pull of her lips into a smile.

"Well, now I'll need a bath as well. Devious child. Come on, your mother will show you how to conjure a raincloud."



With the path for Diana's escape made more evident by Hecate, Circe refocuses her efforts on raising her daughter with every skill she will need in the coming decades, once she returns to Earth, no longer within Circe's protective reach. She knows what the visions hold. She knows what evils her dearest Diana will have to face, without Circe there to guide her hand. The lessons will be many, and even then, she fears they may not be enough. But there is no path out but forward.

Spellcasting, foraging, weapons training, hunting, swimming, hand-to-hand combat, potion brewing, first aid...the list is long and exhausting. Luckily, her daughter is bright and studious, and has already taken voraciously to reading and mathematics and history.

It helps that Diana is naturally curious, brimming with wonder despite the scope of their world being so constrained. She spends many evenings reading until the candles have burned low, leaving wax trails along the walls as she tries to finish just a few more words under the dwindling flame.

Tonight, Circe returns from gathering shells to find Diana slumped over a tome bigger than her lap. She's curled against some scaly red beast, her fingers still folded between pages and her hair falling into her face. The sight of her, adrift in sleep, brings a fond sigh to Circe's lips.

Diana is much heftier now than she was even a year ago, but it is no hardship for Circe to lift her, not when she folds into her mother, seeking comfort and warmth. Two things that Circe would never have thought herself capable of before her world was upended.

"Mama," Diana mumbles, her breath a snuffle of sound against Circe's chest. When did it become such a gift to hear this word on her daughter's lips?

There had been no point in counting the days or years when Circe was alone. What was the use in trying to quantify an infinity of imprisonment? But the passage of time is so inescapably evident with her Diana here as a living testament to the years.

Already, she is so large in Circe's arms. So many times bigger than she was when Apollo brought her into Circe's life. Her baby fat beginning to melt away, her hair long and untamed, her feet now stable and sure as she tears across the Wild Isle, searching for new stones she hasn't yet overturned.

Already, her baby is her own being, with a clear head and a mighty heart. Circe doesn't know when exactly the thought of letting Diana leave her arms began to rend her own stone heart, but her chest splinters with the pain now, and so she carries her little girl to her bed instead, to be coddled for at least one more night.

"Shhh," Circe whispers into her hair. "Sleep now, darling. It will wait until tomorrow."

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and the pace is not petty, it does not creep or slink; it flies so swiftly that Circe has already forgotten the last time she worried about Diana tumbling over her own uncertain feet or crying because Circe could not understand her youthful malformed babble.

There are years and years ahead of them, this she knows, and yet, already, she fears that their time together grows short.



Every child has their growing pains, Circe assumes. She is lucky that Diana's greatest rebellions are not so tremendous that Circe cannot help her daughter eventually see reason. But Diana's rearing also demands that she experience things that no ordinary child her age should be expected to face, and Circe had to come to terms with this several years ago. Her daughter is an Amazon, and must be trained like one if she hopes to survive. As much as it pains her, the goddesses have made it clear there is no time to waste.

She sends Diana across the reaches of Hell, allowing her to stretch her mind and build her endurance as she collects ingredients, both useful and not, on her little quests. Circe knows there are dangers, so she does not leave her daughter unguarded or unarmed, but she also knows she has no choice but to trust in Diana herself.

Diana has been sent to cross the waters and fetch for Circe a kind of insect venom from the oversized pests that make their nests in the clouded crags of the western sector of Hell. She has been gone for several hours, but Circe has busied herself at her

mortar and pestle, testing a new poultice with some of herbs Diana brought her yesterday.

It should have been a half-day quest, with Diana returning to her around nightfall, but Circe hears, though the spellwork she has weaved all through their isle, the splash of disturbed waters at their shore much sooner. Perturbed by this, she exits the cave and heads to the beach, wondering if some sea beast has grown too bold once more, and seeks to challenge her dominion.

What she finds is Diana, feet damp and one leg bloodied, back bowed. She continues to hobble forward, pebbles scattering beneath her shuffling feet.

"Mom," Diana calls when she sees Circe at the crest above the shore, her voice suddenly so young to Circe's ears again, so small.

"Diana!"

Circe has never been one for running, but there is no thought in her mind of the discomfort of dashing across the jagged stones in her soft leather shoes. The pounding of her feet on the ground is as heavy as the thump of her heart, blood rushing in her ears until she has Diana within reach. The fear slithering through her nerves is unlike any she has felt before.

Her hands are too large, clunky and rustic, as she checks Diana over, looking for other injuries before focusing on the gash in her calf. Her daughter answers her clipped, nervous questions with clear answers but weak, wavering energy, and Circe understands belatedly that this can all wait. She must bring Diana home first.

"Hold on now," she says, lifting Diana without jostling her wounded leg. She conjures a wind to hasten her steps and surround Diana with softness as they hurry to the cave.

Her little Diana is not so little anymore, saddeningly close to being of a height with Circe, but the strain is only an afterthought that Circe will not be conscious of until she gently places Diana on the mat by the cauldron, and the weight of Diana's still-growing body dissolves into the weight of Circe's anxiety instead, cold and thrumming and iron-bottomed in her stomach. But she was not granted the title of greatest witch in the world for nothing. Healing her daughter's wound is child's play; it is the fact that Diana can be wounded that elevates

Circe's fear.

Circe cannot die. Not here in the Underworld, unless she gives herself over to one of the untamed beasts who want to devour her. She isn't certain that Diana can either, but Diana's fate is not the same as her mother's. She will not be bound by the rules and walls of Hell forever, and out there, in the world of man, in the living world, she will be alone, without Circe's magic to protect her.

No, not alone. She *must* believe that Diana will become as beloved to humanity as she is to every other creature that has been graced by her light so far. However, it may be an uphill battle, and there is much evil awaiting her. The universe is unkind, and Circe will not let her child leave her side unprepared, but today, Diana has learned enough about cruelty.

Carefully, she applies her poultice to Diana's leg after the wound begins to knit closed from her spell. Diana hisses, but bites down on her lip, trying not to wince. Brave little Amazon. How strong she already is.

"Does it hurt? Stay still and rest. Your cut will take time to heal," Circe says after helping Diana to her bed. She smooths Diana's hair away from her face, gathering the thick curls into three strands to plait. Busy work for her hands, numbing work for her mind.

"I'll be okay," Diana mumbles, shifting so that Circe can tug all her stray, unruly strands into the braid. Her hand curls into the loose fabric of Circe's tunic: anchor to Circe's unmoored ship.

"Yes," Circe agrees, because it can and must become true. It is the only future she will accept.



The morning is unexceptional, Circe will recall later. Like many of the days that have come before, Diana wakes first, and sets off on her early run, beginning her day by taking in the morning view of their little world, and greeting her many crawl and fluttering friends. Circe rises later, content to enjoy another stretch of slumber before the sounds of strange howling creatures or smashing rocks disrupts her sleep. Diana does manage to create a great deal of noise both in and outside their home.

When Circe exits their cave, shielding her eyes from the dark sun hovering in the pink sky, she can hear Diana engaging in combat training over the eastern knoll. Her stroll takes her the long way around to Diana's training grounds.

Diana is busy pummeling a dummy when Circe approaches, her motions fluid and efficient. The regimen her goddesses put her through certainly seems to be working. It isn't any ordinary woman who can forge and wield a sword as long as she is tall. Some days, Circe sits nearby as Diana practices, just to see her daughter move with the unique grace and power that is wholly hers.

Diana spots her as she descends the slope toward the flats, and waves in her direction. "Mother, good morning!" she says, beaming, glowing, so full of incandescent life even here, in the gray of her home, in the endless gloom, the shadow and the shade. Circe smiles, and hikes up her skirt to join her on the sodden ground.

Unfortunately, one of her steps lands awry, and she can feel her leg sliding across the mud, leaving her unbalanced and a split second away from an embarrassing fall. But Diana moves faster than any human can, and is by Circe's side before she has finished her regretful descent.

"Careful!" she says, catching Circe by the arms to steady her before she tumbles unceremoniously into the muck. It costs no effort for her to hold her mother's hands and help her across the treacherous patch of land toward a grassier area.

"You saved me some unnecessary scrubbing. Thank you," Circe says as she catches her breath. She pats her daughter's arm in thanks, and receives a laugh in return.

"I think I've caused you enough scrubbing for a lifetime."

"You did have a tendency to find strange new types of slime I could never have imagined. Dragging you out for bathtime was always an adventure."

She thinks back fondly to when Diana was small enough to heft straight into the air, her little limbs wiggling around as she fought to keep exploring long after it was time to turn in for the evening. Those days are a distant memory. Circe hasn't had to carry her daughter in well over a decade.

Oh, she realizes now, a knife to her stomach. And I may never pick her up again.

Her sweet Diana. Her baby. The sole proof in this wide, wicked, wondrous world that the great sorceress Circe is capable of love. No longer a child, but always *Circe's* child, no matter how long the passing years. Too large now for her mother's arms.

The last time Circe held her daughter...

...she cannot remember when it was. One day, Diana woke to greet the day, and no longer needed her mother to carry her. And Circe should be glad for this, she should be exhilarated that Diana grew into exactly the person she always knew she would become. Her beautiful daughter, born for glory denied to her by the gods themselves, but tempered to perfection, regardless, in the forge of hellfire. Her darling Diana — how could Circe have ever resented her? How did she fill the long days of loneliness before Diana came to her? How will she survive the relentless years after she releases Diana from this cage they call home?

Love truly is transformative.

Diana's smile vastly outshines the strange, ambient light of Hell; she grins with a touch of youthful mischief as she jogs away from Circe, back to her straw and clay dummy.

"Let me give you space, then. I anticipate some mess!"

She returns to her routine of vigorously kicking the dummy, careful not to let it bounce in Circe's direction. Circe watches her with brimming amusement, and wonders how much time remains before she has to let her go.

Circe raised Diana as best she could, arming her with every gift and skill that she knew she would need in the world above.

But she did not do it for the world, or humanity, or for even great Hecate. She raised Diana for *herself*, because she had come to love her, this impossible beacon of light and hope. In the end, Circe's love is selfish, but she cannot bring herself to feel shame or guilt. She is simply thankful that she was given the chance to have been so loved in return.



The tears have dried on her face, but Circe is still reeling with unexpected relief that her daughter has not been lost to her forever. How clever her girl has grown up to be, and how truly beloved by those who know her.

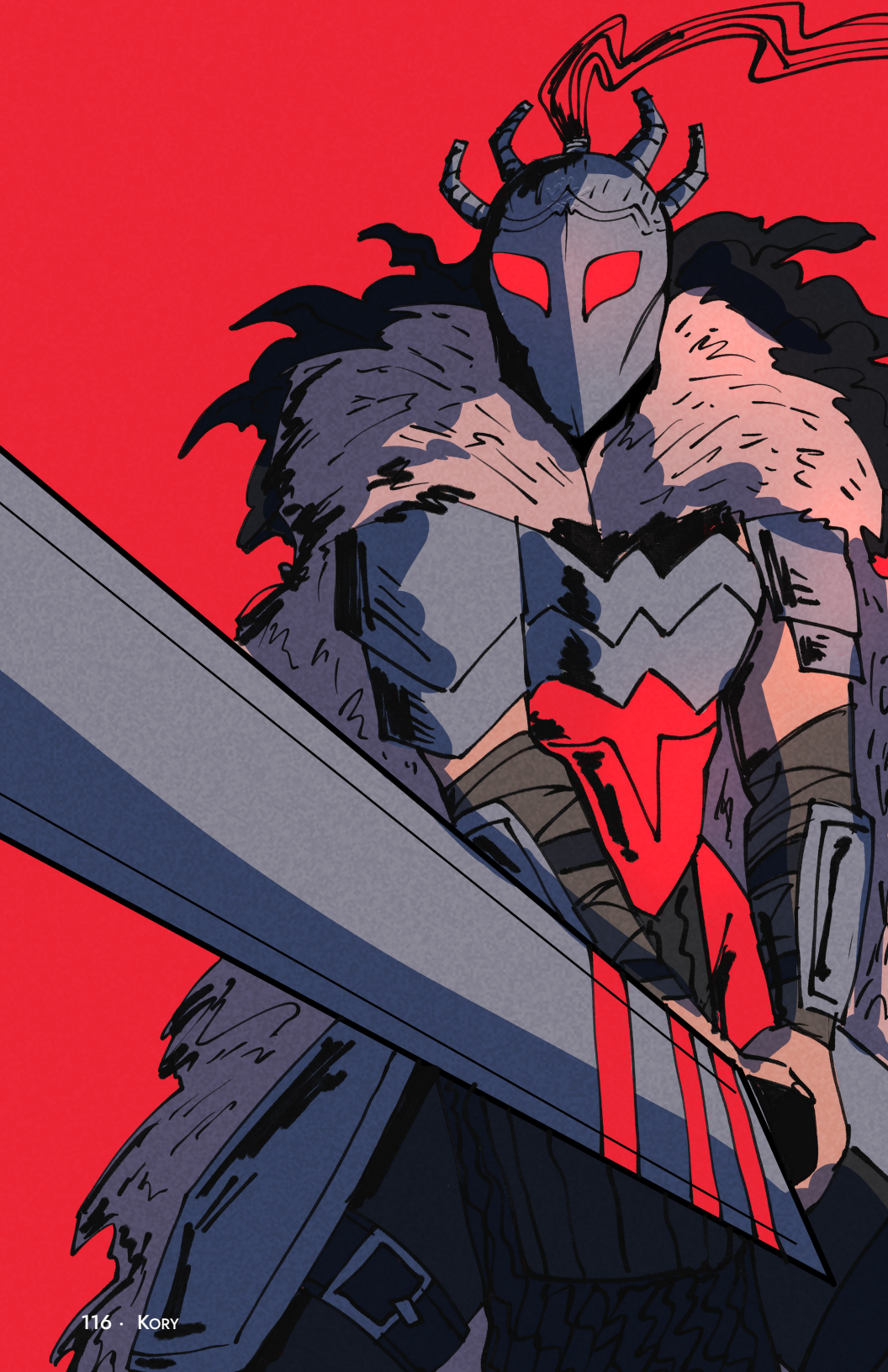
The Wild Isle is visible on the horizon, growing closer by the minute as Diana flies them back home. Circe's arms are looped around Diana's neck to keep herself steady, though she has no doubt that Diana would ever let her fall. How odd it is to be carried by the child she held aloft countless times. How rare a comfort.

"You must be tired after the battle. I hope carrying me doesn't exhaust you further."

"Do not worry, mother. You aren't heavy at all," Diana says warmly. Circe might think it an empty reassurance if she hadn't seen for herself Diana's unbelievable strength over and over again. Strength of body, mind, and will — for one final time, she was gifted the opportunity to witness Diana's indomitable spirit and undying kindness.

"Neither were you."

Diana summons for her a smile, touching their foreheads together, and Circe allows the tears to flow once more. For one final time, she will be her daughter's burden to bear, waiting out the days until they can meet again.



Between Heaven and Hell

A promise she kept, I was not wanted.
A strange journey forth, trained and honed,
for the woman to whom I was given,
my beloved mother, my clever teacher.

We are tools to be used by gods and by men,
but we forge our own path, set our own goal.
A world between, with answers, allies, and purpose,
yet filled with obstacles for me to face.

This new world, familiar yet strange,
is torn at its seams by incursions, decay and secrets,
Now with allies, we hold it together,
all while seeking the truth.

The people deserve it, but the gods make it hard.
The lord of the underworld now holds me in his grasp,
and at the same time, everything tears apart,
corrupting all that is pure.

An endless labyrinth, impossible to navigate,
ruled by a queen cut off from her court
selfish and powerful, but not gone forever.
I extended a hand, perhaps, one day, it will matter.

Now I search once more. The truth must exist.
Answers for why this was done to me and my own.
What is the point? Are the gods truly this cruel?
Or did they leave something for me to know?

The season of the witch is approaching.
Without any answers, it all feels in vain.
But fighting on is all I have ever known.



Written In My Blood and Bones

Said it all before

before.

Io falls.

One of her sisters calls her name, though she cannot discern who. Swords ringing against shields, shoes scraping against stone, cries of pain—the various sounds all hang in the air and confuse her ears.

Even Amazons are not invincible, but if this is to be her end, it is a good one. The bodies of her enemies are strewn about her. Would that such violence were unnecessary, but it is not the fate of the Amazons to live in peace.

Perhaps someday, but— if Queen Hippolyta ever accomplishes such a thing, it seems Io will not see it.

She closes her eyes for what she expects to be the last time, the sound of battle ringing in her ears.

now.

Hippolyta calls for a feast, celebrating both Io's safe return and the good news she carried. It's strange, to go from prisoner to honored guest in the blink of an eye, but for many long years all she's wanted is to see her sisters again.

The stars glint silver in the dark sky overhead— a welcome sight after all the years buried underground. Hippolyta presides over a table laden with food and drink, and as the evening wears on, a number of her sisters come and go from the celebration. At one point, Epione and Kasia pull out musical instruments. Io doesn't play— it's been too long, and her fingers no longer remember the patterns— but she does dance when the opportunity presents itself.

Tonight, she's free.
 She's home.

before.

Io wakes in an ancient stone corridor, her wounds already healed, but there is no sign of anyone else, nor of what art may have brought her here. This is not Hades' realm; that is the only thing she feels certain of. She is too alive for that.

She chooses a direction and begins to walk. The dark is oppressive, keeping her from seeing more than a few steps in front of her, and she drags the fingers of her right hand against the wall to keep her bearings.

A warm glow of light eventually comes into view. Io hurries toward it and finds herself at an intersection, lit by a torch hanging on the wall. She takes the torch and examines it: there doesn't appear to be any fuel, but it burns nonetheless.

All of the passages look the same to Io's eyes. She draws her dagger from its sheath, glad that she has this weapon at least, and cuts a marking at the end of the corridor she's just come from, so she'll recognize it if she returns this way. Then she ventures into the dark once more.

now.

Io traces the labyrinth inked on her skin. More than just simple tattoos, these are a map of the prison she'd been in for decades.

The prison she'd made a home in, paltry as it was. Io could have escaped at nearly any time if she'd so wished. She'd had advantages that the others had not. But as an Amazon, her duty is to protect those weaker than her.

And then.

And *then*.

Her sister had come.

Not just any sister, but Diana, daughter of Hippolyta.

Io applies the needle to her skin one more time, at a junction in the labyrinth on her left bicep. When she wipes away the blood and excess ink, all that is left is a dot, barely more than a freckle.

But Io knows.

That is the place where she had first seen Diana.

before.

Clea thinks she rules the maze, but Io is the one who *knows* it. She has turned her very skin into a map so that she can navigate it. Every time Clea sends someone to the pit, Io attempts to rescue them, to bring them to the little makeshift village they have built.

It's been too long since she's seen the sky. Since she's seen a sister. Io doesn't keep track of the passing days, the passing years, but the lives lost weigh heavily on her.

There's never enough resources in the maze, and the other prisoners aren't always willing to work together. All Io can do is try to protect the ones who will let her, and work on finding a way out. But no matter how far she ventures, how many tunnels she helps dig, the maze goes on forever.

now.

"Tell me about her." Hippolyta takes a seat on the ground next to Io, heedless of her brilliantly-colored skirts.

Io, who had been refamiliarizing herself with the stars, is only surprised that Hippolyta didn't ask sooner. "We only met for a short time," she says.

"Please," Hippolyta replies. She doesn't beg— she's too dignified for that— but there's a hint of a waver in her voice.

Io pictures Diana, as she had appeared in the maze. "She wouldn't leave until everyone had been rescued. She's brave, and clever, and adept with magic. I— she said she was raised by Circe, Hippolyta."

This news clearly troubles her queen. But Hippolyta eventually lets the furrows in her brow smooth. "If she cared for my daughter all these long years, then I cannot be angry with her. It seems time makes strange bedfellows of us all."



THANK YOU FOR READING!



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@justasammy on Tumblr

Work on pages 4, 9, 35–36, 45, 47,
49, 58, 81, 104, 117

Sisaloofafump



@sisaloofafump on Tumblr

Work on pages 5, 122

Vveris



@dysnomiavv on TikTok

@vveris on tumblr

Work on page 66

Saiditalbefore



@saiditalbefore on Tumblr

Work on pages 119–121

Silver Penny



@silver_penny on Ao3

@the-batacombs on Tumblr

Work on pages 27–33

Thao



@phamthaoart on Instagram

Work on page 60

ZeroMonster



@ZeroMonster on Ao3

@flamevbirdv on Tumblr

Work on pages 74–77

